

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



South American treasure

Colombia's rehabilitation as a safe place for tourists is bringing visitors to the country. They shouldn't overlook Bogota, writes Kate Wickers

Eager to practise my Spanish, "Me gusta tu sombrero," I say to the host of Casa Santa Clara, a restaurant perched high on the hilltop of Monserrate in Bogota, Colombia. Said that is a colourful Panama, paired with an equally vibrant poncho. I've only been in the city a day, but already I'm charmed by the exuberance of the people and culture.

The elephant in the room, of course, is Colombia's reputation as the world's biggest grower of coca and producer of cocaine. Since the Netflix hit TV series *Narcos* introduced the world to the lawlessness and brutality of its cartels, Bogota still has a lot to live down. It's now seven years into its peace agreement and 20 years on from the first military crackdown, and transformation into an attractive tourist destination is well underway. Even so, most tourists don't loiter in the capital, hurrying on to sunnier diversions along the Caribbean coast

such as sexy Cartagena and beautiful Tayrona National Park. My straight-talking Colombian friend Carlos has this to say on the matter: "You cannot say you've been to Colombia, if you bypass Bogota. Here, is the real life."

We begin at Monserrate, at 3150m above sea level and reached by cable car to where American kestrels swirl. It's crowned by Bogota's most revered monument, the white church of Cerro de Monserrate, from where we gaze at the capital's 1700-sq-km sprawl, cupped by the magnificent Andes Mountains. Restaurant Casa Santa Clara is an art-deco hacienda that was shipped from France by a wealthy Colombian landowner at the start of the 20th century, then moved to Monserrate in the early 70s. I tuck into a warming ajaco santaferano (a

Bogota's Candelaria is now famous for its street art and bohemian vibe



Street art in the Candelaria area of Bogota, main; view of the city, above

soup made from three types of potato, shredded chicken, corn, capers, and sour cream, and flavoured with guascas, a local herb) as the clouds roll in and temperature drops. Don't go expecting tropical warmth in Bogota as this is one of the highest cities in the world at 2,652 metres and has a typical high-altitudinal climate.

We're staying at Hotel B.O.G (cue my sons' inevitable guffaws), in the trendy district of La Cabrera, bordered by the city's classiest neighbourhoods. The hotel's interior design is ultra-modern, with rippling tactile walls and honey-combed ceilings, and in our spartan though

stylish bedroom there is a shower (with three incredible body jets) made up of matt gold tiles, which feels like a nice nod to one of South America's finest museums, the Museo del Oro, where we head to the next morning after a breakfast of bunuelos, tasty cassava flour balls made with salted cheese.

The gold museum is vast, with bank-vault-like doors protecting each of the main galleries that house 55,000 precious artefacts. Here, we're travelling back to pre-Hispanic eras when all that glitters was gold and in such abundance that decadent jewellery was worn by everyone. And it's satisfying to know that while ogling the ancient bling, my sons are getting a fascinating insight into indigenous Colombian culture and their social habits and religious beliefs.

We take a morning trip to the Salt Cathedral at Zipaquirá, 50km north of the city. It's not the original (built by miners in the 1950s as a place of sanctuary during arduous shifts) as that was closed for safety reasons, but an other-worldly replica built in the early 1990s that lies 180m

underground, consisting of 14 small chapels that lead to the main nave and a monumental cross, and is an epic feat of engineering with an atmosphere rather spoiled by fast-food outlets. By lunchtime we're back in Candelaria, chock-full of 300-year-old houses, where Bogota began. Now famous for its street art (that comments on all from the plight of the indigenous people to LGBTQ rights) and bohemian vibe, we wander the brightly hued streets, browsing stalls that sell everything from fake foxy shirts to feathered dream catchers, beaded jewellery, and brightly painted one hundred Peso notes. All roads lead to Plaza de Chorro del Quevedo (don't miss Sedua, a shop selling vintage and artisanal products with its lovely courtyard café). The plaza is a fabulous people-watching spot, where young chancers play reggae from ghetto-blasters while selling shots of fermented chicha (a frothy alcoholic drink made from corn) to backpackers, and buskers do their best to entertain (who knew that Rick Astley songs could sound so good on pan pipes?). As you wander on, keep an eye out for artist Jorge Olave's 'green people' on the balconies and rooftops that represent the working people of Bogota.

Early is the recommended time to visit Paloquemao produce market, where generous stallholders are quick to offer a taste of anything we linger over, such as curuba, which looks like a small banana but when split reveals orange flesh with black seeds and has a peachy-passionfruit flavour.

Museo Botero has an extensive collection of both sculpture and paintings from Colombia's most famous living artist Fernando Botero (now at the grand old age of 91). He's known for his iconic figures with proportionally exaggerated (fat) bodies and faces of normal dimensions. Easily dismissed as purely comical, Botero's work comments on social and political issues. Within this former monastery with its beautiful central courtyard, is Botero's collection of international



art, including works by Monet, Picasso, and Dali.

Hotel B.O.G is nicely located close to Zona Rosa, packed with enticing restaurants, full of upwardly mobile young Colombians dining on ceviche (fish or shellfish marinated in citrus juice). We join a lively crowd at Central Cevicheria with its family friendly menu: juicy steaks with pepper sauce for my sons; coconut prawns, sauteed in lemon and cilantro butter for me (make sure to try a side order of patacones, fried green plantains).

On our last afternoon, as the thunder clouds roll in to shroud Cerro de Monserrate high on the hill, and the corn-roasting stall holders on Plaza de Bolivar hurriedly pull on plastic ponchos, we shelter in the immense stone doorway of Bogota's cathedral. Balloon, candy floss, and bird seed sellers have also taken cover, and another type of vendor who has a more unusual treat on offer: hormigas colonas (dried giant ants that, apparently, taste like peanuts), sold as an aphrodisiac. It's just one more surprise to the list in a city that constantly shifts perceptions. Number one being that Bogota has never felt safer.

Kate's stay in Bogota was part of a wider holiday in Colombia, travelling with Hayes & Jarvis. 10-night/11day tours from £3788 per person based on two people sharing and including flights www.hayesandjarvis.co.uk



The church of Cerro de Monserrate, above; Salt Cathedral at Zipaquirá, top

SHORT HAUL



Easy on the Algarve

Explore the region and then hit the pool at Anantara Vilamoura, recommends Gaby Soutar

Luxury resorts can be like a bubble. You go there, stay put, and have a glorious time, but you could be anywhere in the world.

It's not like that at Portugal's five-star Anantara Vilamoura Algarve Resort, which is about 25-minutes drive from Faro airport.

There is a concerted effort to connect guests to its location.

To be fair, we could've happily spent hours on a lounge, listening to the Saturday poolside DJ and letting our milk-bottle-white bodies turn puce. Or, hung out in one of the seven restaurants, if not on the balcony of our peaceful Golf View Suite, with its rolling green view.

That's especially appealing, since the immaculate hotel was revamped earlier this year, and there are now child-friendly Swim-Up Rooms, new suites, and the building has been divided into distinct adults-only areas and those for families, with a pool each, so never the twain shall meet.

However, this is only my second time visiting Portugal. I want to get my bearings. As it says on the keycards here; "Life is a journey".

The hotel offers a selection of exclusive experiences, which can be organised by their Journeys Expert,

situated in the lobby.

On day one, we're taken out in a 4x4 by Mateus for The Flavours of the Algarve tour. The original plan is to visit the nearby weekend market at Loulé, but we go slightly off piste.

Mateus grew up in a fishing village nearby, and he's encyclopaedic, when it comes to the area. He points in the direction of where the wildfires were burning in the summer, and tells us about driving through that area recently. Everything was blackened. Thankfully, it's still lush where we are. The air is balmy and fragrant, and there are figs, oranges, almonds, melons, pomegranates and avocados growing at local farms. There are also carob trees. According to Mateus, this harvest is currently worth more than gold, thanks in part to it being a popular ingredient in Asia, and we spot locals harvesting these black scabbard-like pods. (That night, in the hotel, carob chocolates are left on our pillows at turn down).

There are also cork trees, with bark across their middles partially stripped, so they look like they're wearing socks with shorts. The older the cork, the more likely it'll be bought by a top champagne house as a stopper for their finest vintage. There's also a brief trip to the pretty village of Alte, and, on the way there,



we look at the old windmills on the hillsides, see a hoopoe and an ibis, and stop at the cottage business that is JR Aguardente de Medronho, where they create the local 'firewater'.

When we get back to the hotel, our brains are buzzing. The excursion is all we can talk about over our casual Palms Pool Bar lunch and the same when it comes to dinner at their seafood restaurant, RIA, where my sea bass is filleted beside our outdoor table as an inky dusk falls, to the strains of their live singer's Lady Gaga rendition.

There is more to see the next day, with a whistle-stop tuk-tuk tour, taken by Katja, to the red cliffs at

The excursion is all we can talk about over our Palms Pool Bar lunch

the incredibly beautiful Falésia Beach, where the peachy sands are punctuated by cobalt parasols and cabanas. On the way back, the wind is in our hair, as she jets along, with stops en route, including one to a local honey farm.

Now that we've orientated ourselves, we feel more deserving of the relaxation element.

I spend my afternoon in the top floor Anantara Spa, where there's a pool, sauna, steam room and a wrap around rooftop terrace that offers

View from and inside the Golf View Suite at Anantara Vilamoura Algarve Resort

views of the neighbouring Victoria Golf Course, home of the Portugal Masters. After a welcoming foot ritual, using orange-scented salts, the therapist pummels away my residual stress, with the full body Anantara Signature treatment.

That evening, there's a goldfish bowl's worth of G&T at their gin bar, Botanic. On a shelf above the bar, you'll find Scottish spirits, like Edinburgh Gin and Hendrick's, but we're very unpatriotic and go for the Portuguese Black Pig variety. It's a preprandial treat before a six-course dinner at Sensai – their Asian-influenced restaurant, where dishes include miso-marinated salmon, sushi and massaman slow-cooked beef cheeks. However, you could also do Italian at La Cucina, or try the very upmarket Spice Spoons, among other eating offerings.

So, yes, exploring is essential, but you've got to luxuriate in that bubble too.

Anantara Vilamoura Algarve Resort, www.anantara.com. Room rates for the Golf View Suite start from €787 (including taxes and breakfast - same price for single/double occupancy). The Flavours of the Algarve tour costs €415 and the Tuk-Tuk Tour is €25 per person.

EXPLORE

Find the wild beauty that inspires location scouts

From Game of Thrones to Star Wars, go location-hunting on the island of Ireland, writes Sarah Marshall

Camera technology is capable of conjuring up magical landscapes, but nothing can ever beat what nature has created. According to research by Expedia, streamed movies and shows are now the top sources of travel inspiration. In the UK, 46% of travellers considered visiting a destination after seeing it on a show or movie on a streaming platform, and 36% have already booked trips to destinations after seeing them on screen.

Testimony to the beauty and diversity of its landscapes, Ireland and Northern Ireland has set the scene for numerous films and hit TV shows. Here are a few of the top spots that have found A-list fame...

£440 for up to three people. Visit toursbylocals.com

Fantasy lands

Where: All over!

Featured in: Game Of Thrones
Dozens of locations across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland featured throughout eight seasons of the cult series. Some of the most famous destinations include Castle Ward, 40 minutes outside of Belfast, which doubled as Winterfell; Cushendun Caves in County Antrim, where Melisandre gave birth to the shadow baby that ultimately slaughtered Renly Baratheon; and Tollmore Forest, the first state park in Northern Ireland, used for Winterfell Forest and the land surrounding The Wall in the far north of Westeros.

How: Hardcore fans can combine a trip to Ireland with Iceland (another popular GOT filming destination) on Black Tomato's tailor-made eight-night tour. From £8,300pp, including B&B accommodation, activities and transfers. Flights extra. Visit blacktomato.com

Better than fiction

Where: Great Skellig

Featured in: Star Wars

This rocky island, west of the Iveragh Peninsula in County Kerry had a monastery founded on its steep slopes in the 6th century AD. More recently – Luke Skywalker found sanctuary here.

But although the UNESCO World Heritage Site features in both Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens and Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi, risky access meant Inishowen peninsula, Ceann Sibeal in Dingle, and Crookhaven in Cork were often used as stand-ins.

How: See the Skelligs as part of HF Holidays' escorted five-night Wild and Wonderful Western Ireland itinerary. From £1,174 per person, including half-board accommodation. Various departures from June to September 2024. Flights extra. Visit hfholidays.co.uk



Keem Beach on Achill Island features in hit film The Banshees Of Inisherin