



Article published by Monsters and Critics.com, WotR Ltd. in "Feature Travel | Lifestyle" on Nov 20, 2007

http://lifestyle.monstersandcritics.com/travel/features/article_1375110.php/Colombia_witnesses_resurging_tourist_numbers

Cartagena, Colombia - Colombia's tourist industry, long a victim of the nation's unrest, is beginning to see signs of life again as visitors return to discover the nation's cities and lush countryside.

Nowadays, tourists do not limit themselves to the Caribbean coast, which boasts Cartagena and the islands of San Andres and Providencia. Cities like Bogota, Cali and Medellin are seeing more foreign visitors, with a noticeable hike in the proportion of tourists to businessmen.

Cartagena's alleys are still full of people. Once the midday heat subsides, locals and gringos throng the streets between the city walls to visit churches and museums.

The huge sculptures of women by Colombian artist Fernando Botero in the Plaza de Santo Domingo are a popular photo opportunity for tourists. Most of the cafes and restaurants are crowded after dark.

'Cartagena always had tourists,' says Carolina Bernal, sales manager of the luxury Santa Clara Hotel, built on the foundations of a 400-year-old convent from which it takes its name.

'The city was always safer than other regions. Of course, hotels and restaurants are doing even better business today.'

The islands off Cartagena's coast are also popular among tourists, as hiking through the jungles and villages on the mainland can be dangerous.

'But, with us, it's very safe. We love the foreign guests,' says Chrisilada. The 60-year old runs a bric-a-brac shop in the village of Orica on Isla Grande. It takes a 45-minute boat trip from Cartagena to the island. Most visitors come to relax or go diving.

The coastal town of Santa Marta and the fishing and diving village of Taganga are almost a three-hour car ride from Cartagena. Many Colombians vacation there themselves. World travellers and those seeking relaxation can enjoy the good life there.

A standard hotel package costs 65 dollars. Hotels do not organize programmes for their guests, but they do offer simple rooms with a fan and a shower and three good meals a day often consisting of fresh fish.

From Taganga, it's not far to the Tayrona National Park, one of Colombia's especially beautiful areas where there's a jungle with plenty of flora and fauna, fine sandy beaches and controlled contact with indigenous Indian tribes is also possible. Villages are full of clucking chickens and goats. The coconut trees are heavily laden and there are banana plants aplenty.

'A lot of berries also grow on beach shrubs and in the jungle. The indigenous people use those for food,' says park ranger Albero Jimenez before taking his guests to a raised spot in the forest with a house made of clay and wattle - the home of an extended family of the Kogui Indios tribe.

Tapioca, corn and bananas grow on the mound. Today, the Kogui are respected and enjoy autonomy and rights.

Just a few minutes' walking distance lie spectacularly tempting beaches framed by turquoise water and lush verdant vegetation.

Colombia's Caribbean islands of San Andres and Providencia were sheltered from uprisings and kidnappings during the troublesome 1990s. Both lie closer to the Central American coast than to Colombia. San Andres is well suited for package, beach and shopping holidays.

Providencia, one of the Caribbean's most affordable and pristine islands, offers 'Caribbean Feeling.' About 5,000 indigenous residents live at the foot of a few green hills along the beach and the area has plenty of amenities for fishermen and divers.

Homeaward-bound school children snack on mango, papaya or tangerines from the tree. Hummingbirds dart from tropical blossoms as pelicans glide over the crystal clear water.

Regions that used to be dangerous are now safe to visit.

'I only hesitatingly walked along here three or four years ago. There were too many drug problems and too much violence,' says Juan Jose Del Real outside the Museo de Antioquia in the heart of Medellin.

'Today, a walk can be quite pleasant.'

© 2007 dpa - Deutsche Presse-Agentur