

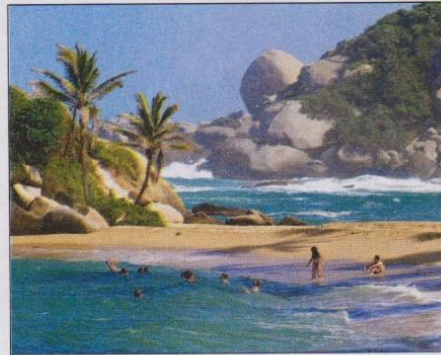
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Travel

This week's dream: Colombia's lush mountains and lovely beaches

Colombia must be "the world's most misrepresented and misspelt country", says Bee Rowlatt in The Daily Telegraph. It may still be associated with cocaine and kidnappings, but the bad old days are long gone: owing to political change, "enviable economic growth", and a thriving arts scene, tourists are coming back – and they are not coke-heads or "conflict-zone junkies". Colombia has been transformed "from adventure location to dream family holiday".

Colombia's coffee zone is "the jewel in its crown". The country's most famous (legal) export is grown on the lush slopes of the Andes. There's an "astonishing" biodiversity here, and visitors get a warm welcome from the many working coffee farms that open their doors to tourists. Hacienda Venecia is one of the best: a rambling old farm that "hosts coffee enthusiasts from around the world". It's an enchanting place, populated by hummingbirds and iguanas, with unbelievable 360° views from



One of the "perfect beaches" in Tayrona National Park

the verandah and plenty of hammocks in which to flop back and appreciate them. It's impossible not to be "smitten. There is nowhere like this."

For a coastal experience, try the campsite at Cabo San Juan del Guía in the Tayrona National Park. There are "two perfect beaches" fed by a freshwater stream. "Coconut trees lean in, rustling soothingly", and there are yet more hammocks, "draped everywhere". Boat trips and snorkelling are available in the calm waters, or if you want a bit of history, drive inland to attempt the "steep" hike through jungle to Pueblito, an ancient pre-Hispanic village far above the busy coast in the cool mountains.

Abandoned 500 years ago, it's astonishingly well preserved, yet inhabited only by monkeys and "iridescent blue butterflies". Avianca (0800-031 4206, www.avianca.com) flies from London to Bogotá from £583 rtn. Hacienda Venecia (+57 320 636 5719, www.haciendavenecia.com) has doubles from £65 per night.

Hotel of the week



La Grande Maison, Bordeaux, France

Created by "two grandees of the French gastronomic scene" – Bernard Magrez and Joël Robuchon – this hotel is a true dining destination, says Natalie Whittle in the Financial Times. It has only six bedrooms, and feels like a "baronial home", with velvet upholstery, heavy curtains and "suffusions of flowers". Sleeping in one of the richly "old-fashioned" rooms "is like being rolled up in a French tapestry". Eating in the Michelin-chasing restaurant is an event, from the meticulous amuse-bouches to the "mobile glutton's altar" that is the dessert trolley.

La Grande Maison (www.lagrandedemaison-bordeaux.com) has doubles from €395. Prix-fixe menus €160-€210.

Getting the flavour of...

Tobago's magical waters

There's a "most magical tour" in Tobago that can only be taken after dark, says Sarah Baxter in The Independent. First, you have to learn to paddleboard – which is tricky, but on a stable beginner's board in calm waters anyone can do it. Then, when night falls, you wobble out "like Bambi on ice" onto the waters of a mangrove-fringed lagoon that are a "horbed of bioluminescence". Initially, there's only a vague glow, then all at once "the world catches fire". With each dip of the blade, there's a swirl of "ghostly vapour"; when you lift the blade up, "drips fall and hit the surface where they explode like tiny stars". Each wave of the paddle sends "sorcerous shazams" in all directions. No longer Bambi, now you feel "like Gandalf". Stand Up Paddle Tobago (+1 868 681 4741, www.standuppaddletobago.com) takes tours for around £40pp, lesson included.

The Titanic in Tennessee

When artefacts from the Titanic were salvaged in the 1980s, around 400 of them made their way to Tennessee, says Susan Harlan in The Guardian. Here, they are housed in a half-scale replica of the ship which opened as a museum in 2010. The visitor "experience" is essentially a "fake brush with death": on arrival, you are given a boarding pass with a real passenger's name. You then enter "a world of inevitable

doom". The tour is led by a guide dressed in a captain's uniform, who leads you past cabinets full of passengers' personal effects and recreations of cabins, to a mock-up of the ship's bow. It is built in a "freezing" cold room, where you are surrounded by a vast painted backdrop of the night sky, and a looming iceberg ahead. There's even a trough of -2°C water (the temperature of the Atlantic that fateful night) and "creepy" sound effects for added chill. Admission \$27. Visit www.titanicpigeonforge.com.

Hidden delights in The Hague

Arriving at The Hague on the express train from Amsterdam, you are greeted by "a lot of concrete" and "winds whipping in from the North Sea", says Alex Clark in the London Evening Standard. But make your way to the historic old town, and you'll realise that the Dutch town is the perfect place for a short-haul escape. Best explored on foot, the streets reveal plenty of "in-your-face sights" like the Grote Kerk church, and unassuming ones, such as the "beautiful almshouses and gardens hidden down tiny alleyways". The prime minister's office, housed in a little tower on the edge of lake Hofvijver, "beats even 10 Downing Street for quaintness", while Scheveningen, "The Hague's very own seaside resort", is only a 15-minute tram-hop away. KLM (www.klm.com) flies to Amsterdam from £79 return.

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

Bruges and Waterloo

Mark the bicentenary of Waterloo with a 4-night Belgium trip with Huon Mallalieu. £1,695pp (meals, Eurostar). 020-7436 8801, www.theoldie.co.uk/bruges-and-waterloo. Depart 13 July.

Icelandic getaway

Staying at the central Hotel Frón in Reykjavík, enjoy a 2-night break from £199pp b&cb, incl. Gatwick flights and an excursion. 020-8099 9366, www.viva-holidays.co.uk. Book by 7 Apr, travel in Oct.

Northumbrian short break

Visit Alnwick Castle during a 7-night stay at the Paikes Lane Apartment (sleeps 3), in the centre of town. Prices from £293.25 (was £345). 01228-406721, www.northumbrian-cottages.info. Arrive 10 April.

Hong Kong and Fiji

Enjoy a 2-night stay at the Metropark Hotel Causeway Bay, followed by a 6-night stay at the Fiji Hideaway Resort, for £1,395 per person. 0800-988 4834, www.aus.travel.com. Select dates in June.