

getaway



Making the most of your time off

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Glad to 'risk' my life on a magical trip to Colombia

THERE are very few places that I am asked to go and write about, that I think seriously if I am going to come back alive or not before making the decision to go.

When I received the call to go to Colombia in northwestern South America, and often perceived as a dangerous place, I was nevertheless already packing my bags.

Although Iberia airlines was kind enough to sponsor the gruelling flight in economy class, I would have rather blown my life savings following the Nolan sisters on a worldwide tour than go through that again – just not enough legroom for my height and very poor service. I would recommend flying via Miami or Houston in the United States to ensure reliability.

You might not know that Colombia has a Caribbean coastline (as well as being on the Pacific Ocean) and two Caribbean Islands, Providencia and San Andres.

I changed planes in Bogota and after managing to find the domestic terminal, which was just next-door, I took a local flight north to Santa Marta.

This was a good choice for the early Spanish explorers, as it has a beautiful natural harbour. Santa Marta is surrounded by the Sierra Nevada mountain range as well as having beautiful beaches, unspoiled by tourists. There is the picturesque working fishing village of Taganga, where fishing boats lazily bob up and down on the small swell.

Ciudad Perdida (Lost City), which is some days on foot high up in the mountains, is thought to be older than Machu Picchu but was sadly not available to get to when I was there due to an 'army exercise' – an euphemism for 'drug operation' perhaps.

I then headed to the Tayrona National Park some 40km away from

The South American country has a bit of a reputation, but that did not put off explorer **NICK BATEMAN** from discovering one of the few places he would go back to

Santa Marta. You really need a yellow fever jab as a requirement for entry to this park. On paying an entry fee, you can either walk or rent a horse. This is no ordinary park: 300 species of birds, 31 different reptiles, 15 different species of amphibians, plus there are many monkeys, and even human tribes wandering around.

I find it hard to describe the sounds, movements, noises and the beauty of this park. The forest is pretty dense and is hard work in the heat, but after a few hours, the forest gives way to white virgin beaches.

The sea close to the shore is coloured green by the trees, but gives away offshore to 'Microsoft screen' blue seas. There are campsites for travellers or hotels if you want a bit of luxury.

The city of Cartagena is perhaps the most touristy town on the Colombian Caribbean coast as it has something for everyone; beaches, museums, history and perfect views from places like La Popa Hill which sits above the city and looks over the city and harbour.

I walked around the fortified walls and I could have been in a dozen cities on the Spanish mainland. A lot of these forts are over 500 years old. There is a great liveliness about the small and intimate streets in the old city and plenty of street vendors offering almost anything – some would happily rob you blind in a second if your wits were not about you.

This beautiful city has been the backdrop for many films, such as *Romancing the Stone*, and *Love in the*



ROMANCING THE VIEW: Looking out over the most touristy Colombian city of Cartagena. Below, the island of San Andres

Time of Cholera and due to the average low temperature at night being 76C, everyone eats and drinks and parties outside.

The city is split in two main areas, the walled city, which is where the tourists hang out and where most of the hotels are, and the suburbs. I walked down to the exclusive Castillo Grande neighbourhood, which has its own beach. Time permitting I would have liked to go to one of the many beaches and small islands off the coast reachable by small boat only.

A short trip across the sea by air and I landed on the island of San Andres, a duty free island that is quite small at just 13km long and 3km wide and really quite flat, but walkable.

I hired a scooter and as long as you can avoid stray dogs and pot holes, it is the best method of transport. While this is perhaps the last unspoiled Caribbean island with its magnificent private beaches, amazing coral reefs and hidden caves where pirates hid their booty, this status quo will not last. The snorkelling and diving here, I found on a par with the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.

UNESCO has declared the next island of Providencia, like San Andres, a World Biosphere Reserve, which

really means it is rather special. Providencia is smaller than San Andres but hillier and slightly more basic, and has a charm only surpassed by its people, who speak little English but cook the most fabulous meals using Caribbean soul and South American flair.

A cocktail of no fast food chains, little or no internet connection, no bars with Sky TV, and limited mobile connections, would make Robinson Crusoe proud. I have yet to go somewhere with such beauty that I really didn't want to write about it – I want it to be my secret. There can only be a few places like these islands (that remain largely unspoiled by the excesses of development and the corruption of tourism) that makes you want to live there.

I felt very safe in Colombia, and yes on the mainland there is a heavy troop presence with armed guards outside the hotel in Bogota, but this is

the same as many hotels in the world.

Like most places – if you look for trouble you will find it. Colombia may be the new kid on the block but when it comes to tourism it should be a 'must go' rather than a 'maybe go' place. I rarely go back to the same place, apart from my village pub, but Colombia is my exception to that rule.

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FACTFILE

■ For more information on visiting Colombia see www.colombia.travel/en or www.sanandres.com.

■ For information on getting there and around visit these websites www.satena.com, www.avianca.co.uk and www.iberia.com/gb.

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