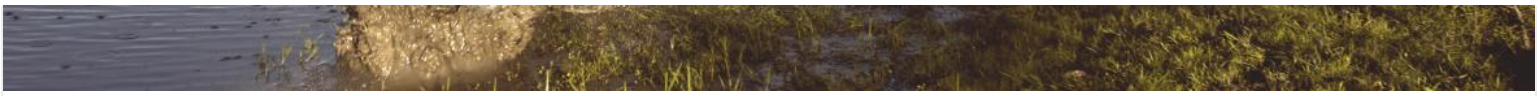
LUXURY TRAVEL

Cowboys and beach clubs: Colombia's take on luxury

See the country in a new way, staying at a remote eco-camp and exploring the swish resorts on the Caribbean coast



Guanapalo nature reserve in Colombia's unexplored northeast

Monique Rivalland Saturday February 29 2020, 12.01am GMT, The Times

The chief cowboy, Seco, is asking me which bull I would like to buy. At least I think he is. I am astride a horse in a corral and I can't really hear over the din of the mooing. I naively point at one with horns and the cowboys laugh. "Los cojones!" Seco cries. Balls. Look for the balls.

I may not be a bona fide cowgirl (yet), but I am beginning to feel like one — especially in my felt hat and horsehair ribbon, which flutters in the wind as I trot.

This is life on Guanapalo nature reserve, a mighty savannah in Colombia's unexplored northeast. It's where you'll find los llaneros, the cattle herders of Colombia's lowlands, and a new luxury eco-camp called CoroCora. This is the region's first exposure to tourism and it's also a conservation project, which is why the cowboys have welcomed the initiative on to their land.

CoroCora offers an extraordinary cultural experience
JOSUE COPETE

This is the first stop on my ten-day tour of Colombia, which will take me more than 1,000km, from the capital of Bogota to the Caribbean coast. Upscale travel is a relatively new concept here. Civil war, the brutal cocaine trade and guerrilla kidnappings deterred many visitors for more than 50 years. A Colombian friend of mine said she couldn't imagine how the country would "do luxury". But in these more peaceful days there are chic new places popping up all over the place alongside experiences that can't be replicated elsewhere.

CoroCora is not so much about glamour and ease, but about the extraordinary — and exclusive — cultural experience.

It's a one-hour flight from Bogota to Yopal, where I am met by a guide. Then it's a two-and-a-half-hour jerk east on a bumpy dirt track into the heart of the savannah, where, eventually, five large canvas tents appear on the horizon. While they are unremarkable on the outside, so as not to blot the landscape, inside the decor is classic safari-luxe, but with a Latino twist — net-draped beds with brightly embroidered cushions and Acapulco chairs on the deck. In the bathroom are plant-based toiletries and bug spray. There's a maximum of eight guests at the camp, plus six staff — and, of course, the cowboys, who ride in from their ranch at dawn.

Its dual raisons d'être mean that it's first a conservation project that studies and protects the traditions and wildlife of the area (pumas, ocelots, caimans, giant anteaters, armadillos, porcupines and myriad bird species) and second a tourist experience that provides income for the herders. Alexis, the young Frenchman who came up with the concept, tells me that if they had to pack up the camp tomorrow, they could do so without leaving a trace.

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Taking in this vast grassland, stretching 500km east into western Venezuela and south until the Amazon, is easy at a gallop. Most of the year the region is water plains, but I'm here in the dry season (which tends to last from December to March) and the mid-morning sun is bouncing off the knoll crests. Scarlet ibis wading birds (the "corocoras" after which the camp is named) perch at a pond's edge and we whizz past hundreds of capybaras, which look like gigantic guinea pigs and are the largest rodents on the planet.

Buzzing with adrenaline, we are welcomed back by Alejandro, whom I suppose you would call a maître d', although that feels a little grand for a man outside a tent, even if he is proffering a plate of cold towels (it's 33C). Over two days we try local dishes such as avocado with chicharron (pork belly), yucca (like cassava or yam) gnocchi in creole sauce, and wild river fish with

chimichurri. Dessert, a bowl of iced guanabana (a tropical fruit something like a pear crossed with a banana), is delicious. In the evenings, after a guided afternoon ramble that finishes at last light, guests sit around a campfire with an aperitivo and watch the stars prick the sky. If you're lucky, one of the cowboys' daughter's will sing folk songs.

At night, once you've stumbled back to your tent in the dark, dodging giant guinea pigs, the resident bird and lizard orchestra begins. There's a walkie-talkie for calling Alejandro if you have any unexpected visitors. When we mention seeing a mouse, he's mortified, but only because it could attract a snake. (Tents for two cost £483 a night, corocoracamp.com.)

After this jaunt in the wild, returning to Bogota — not a pretty city — is quite a shock. It's at a much higher altitude, so it's cold; the freight traffic is dense and the city is cloaked in smog. But it's the gateway to almost everywhere else in Colombia. You can fly to Medellin, but we drove for seven hours across the magnificent Andes through the coffee-growing region, stopping at pretty mountain towns along the way, including Salento and Jerico, with their small, beautifully

preserved old towns surrounded by hiking trails. One of the best is a four-hour, mid-level walk through the Cocora Valley to see the tallest palm trees on earth.

In Medellin most people stay in the affluent, jungle-fringed neighbourhood of El Poblado, where the streets resemble an east London plant shop — walls of cheese plants and rubber plants and birds of paradise. It feels luscious and rich, and it is: those with money in Medellin have serious money. It was here that Pablo Escobar reigned supreme for the latter decades of the 20th century. That in turn has attracted tourists, many lured by the Netflix show *Narcos*, which tells the story of the drug kingpin who fed billions into the city and was viewed as something of a (violent) Robin Hood. The result is that in Medellin, more than in any other Colombian city, you find plenty of chichi hotels, cocktail bars and restaurants.

The inexpensive Celestino boutique hotel has a rooftop hot tub and Soho House feel

We stay at inexpensive Celestino, with its rooftop hot tub and Soho House feel (balcony rooms from £106, hotelcelestino.com). It's right in the El Poblado mix, a five-minute walk from Moshi, the new Asian-Colombian fine-dining restaurant from the people behind Carmen, another of the city's fine-dining experiences (£60 for a tasting menu, moshimedellin.co). Eating healthily can be a challenge in Colombia, so take your chance. The hotel is near El Poblado's salsa clubs, which are loud until late at weekends. But they give the neighbourhood a sense of Colombian spirit, which is welcome in what could otherwise become a homogenised hipster town.

Our next destination, a one-hour flight from

Medellin, is Cartagena on Colombia's Caribbean coast. An easy walk from the waterfront, our hotel, Casa San Agustin, is three 17th-century Andalusian-style mansions with a courtyard, arched galleries and a section of an ancient aqueduct straddling the swimming pool. Just beyond the palm-filled patio is Alma, the hotel's smart restaurant, where the executive chef Heberto Eljach serves his signature seafood casserole. Inside the regal rooms, which have lofty wooden-clad ceilings, everything is oversized: the bathroom, the wardrobe, the windows, the balcony overlooking the city rooftops (doubles from £420, hotelcasasanagustin.com).

Within the city walls, Cartagena — a significant port and fort on the transatlantic slave route — is technicolour. Walk down any street in the historic centre and you'll be dazzled by its exotic palette of pink bougainvillea, mint green houses and blue skies. The crowds, however, can be so dense that, once you've had a stroll, swung by the Castillo de San Felipe hilltop fort and eaten some delicious ceviche outside at La Cevicheria, you might want to escape — and you can for an afternoon or longer.

Casa San Agustin

Much of Cartagena's appeal stems from its proximity to the Caribbean tropics. The Rosario Islands and Baru peninsula are less than a two-hour boat trip away. And now you don't have to make do with dreary island resorts. There's upmarket Blue Apple Beach House on nearby Tierra Bomba island and five-star Las Islas, which opened on Baru peninsula, southwest of the city, 18 months ago.

A private speedboat will deliver you to Blue

Apple in 20 minutes and you'll find the city's fashionable crowd here looking fabulous. It has a handful of cabanas if you want to stay the night, but it's really all about the day party, à la Ibiza. Cocktails in coconuts and plates of sea bass carpaccio flow steadily from the kitchen to poolside loungers. In the background are Balearic beats and sun-worshippers paddleboarding on the water. It's only about £8 for a double day bed and the same for a plate of carpaccio (blueapplebeach.com).

The ritzy resort of Las Islas offers the full five-star experience: guests are collected from Cartagena port and the 45-minute boat trip there ends with a gentle cruise through the hotel's private mangroves. Golf buggies trundle between their 54 stilted bungalows, thatched roofs hidden high in the treetops. Each has a deck overlooking the bay and beyond, and a pair of bicycles are parked at the bottom of the stairs (treetop bungalows from £470 for two, lasislas.com.co).

Blue Apple Beach House on Tierra Bomba island

You can dip into all the classic resort activities — snorkelling, boat trips, lazing at the beach club over pina coladas — but it's most fun to people-watch. It's a beautiful place, idyllic even. Yet there's an over-zealousness to please. Plates are cleared before you've finished, and wine is topped up at three-minute intervals. You can't even take a yoghurt from the breakfast buffet without someone offering to carry it for you. The staff are so warm and charming, though, it's easy

to forgive Colombia for not being as polished as other luxury veterans, such as St Tropez. Besides, that might just be part of its allure.

Monique Rivalland was a guest of all the hotels mentioned. Jacada Travel offers eight nights in Colombia with two each at Cora Cora Camp, Hotel Celestino, Casa San Agustin and Hotel Las Islas plus flights from £5,900pp (jacadatravel.com)

Three more cool places to stay in Colombia

Casa del Presidente

Live it up in presidential style in the former home of one of Colombia's most celebrated presidents. Belisario Betancur, who died in 2018, is remembered for his efforts to end guerrilla warfare and bring peace to Colombia. His palatial 18th-century villa, now a sumptuous five-bedroom boutique hotel, is a landmark in the well-preserved old artists' town of Barichara in the northern department of Santander. It's remote — you'll need to fly to Bucaramanga and from there it's a three-and-a-half-hour drive or a 20-minute helicopter ride. But it's worth the effort. Impressive Chicamocha Canyon is easily accessible en route and you can spend days

exploring on foot, by bike or by raft. Back at base there's a pool and pretty gardens, and from the bedroom balconies guests have views over the Andes and of Barichara's cobbled streets and terracotta rooftops.
Details Doubles from £752 (casadelpresidente.com.co)

Cannua Lodge
This new eco-lodge in the Antioquian mountains is just over an hour's drive east of Medellin. Guests stay in modern brick cabanas with floor-to-ceiling windows. Some have private gardens, others have decks, but all of them have spectacular vistas of the San Nicolas valley. The deluxe option has two storeys and can sleep a family of four. The emphasis at Cannua is on permaculture and learning about it in the lap of (sustainable) luxury. There are walks and tours that will teach you about the abundant biodiversity of the region — there are more than 90 bird species at Cannua — as well as excursions to local fincas (country houses). The retreat also has a spa and a smart restaurant serving organic Colombian food with an Asian and European twist.
Details Cabanas for two from £193 (cannua.com)

The Artisan DC Hotel

This urban hotel from the Autograph Collection is a cool retreat from the chaos of Bogota, in the central, financial district of Chapinero. Large picture windows supply a sense of the downtown buzz without you having to be in the thick of it. The bedrooms are bright and a marriage of modern and vintage flair, with touches such as brightly coloured pendant lamps and old speakers; they also feature sleek marble bathrooms. Exposed brick walls are decorated with modern art. Tempting weathered leather sofas fill the lobby, but you'll probably want to settle into the Cooper Lounge's inventive cocktail menu. There's a speakeasy bar as well as Asian-Colombian fusion food at the hotel's Osaki restaurant.

Details Doubles from £163 (autograph-hotels.marriott.com)