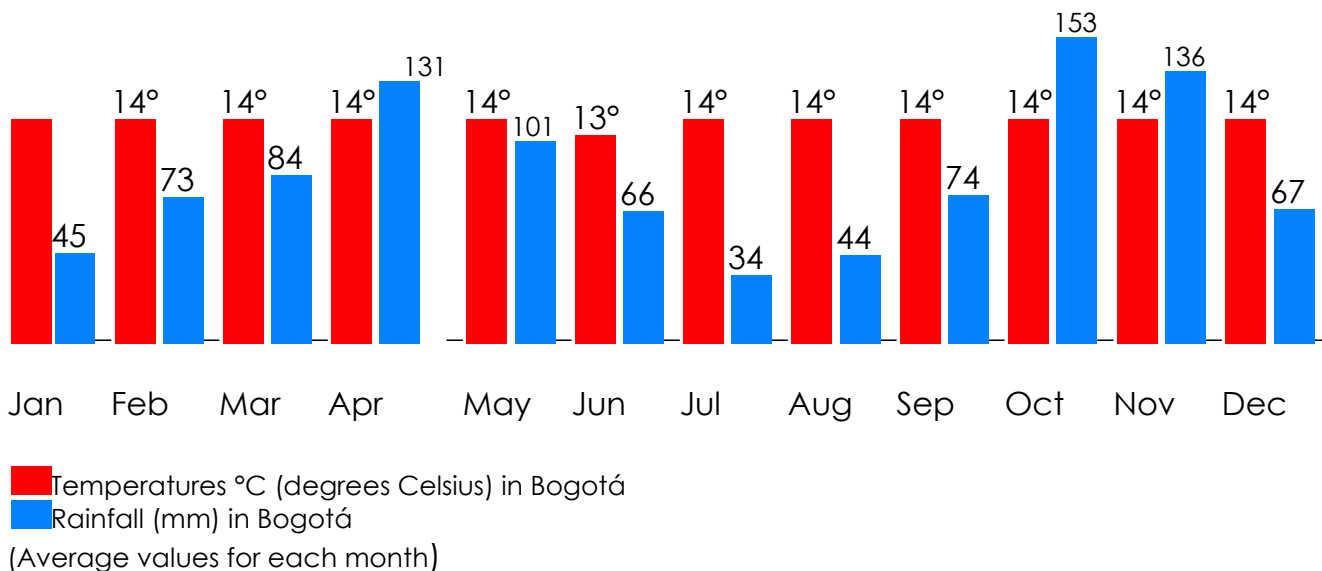


Colombia57 pre departure information

Climate

The climate throughout Colombia due to its vast and diverse geography can vary almost every day. In the Andean mountain ranges there is a high chance of rain throughout the year. Along the Caribbean coast the weather is consistently warm, with occasional outbreaks of heavy showers. Through the central Cordillera the days can be warm by day but temperatures by night can fall considerably. There are two seasons in Colombia, which have been affected by El Niño, but as a general rule there are two of each dry and rainy; Dry season runs from December to March and then July to August.



Clothing

With the variation in altitude you will have to be prepared for several climates changes throughout your journey, from the cooler Andean peaks to a humid Cartagena.

A good pair of walking shoes or sturdy trainers (Sneakers) is advisable for walking in and around the cobbled streets of some of the colonial towns and the grassy and sometimes muddy terrain of the Coffee region. A good pair of thick socks are always well worth it when walking longer distances.

Even though you hope not to use it, a light weight water proof jacket is ideal, together with a sweater/fleece for the evenings. A long sleeved shirt can be helpful in the evening but also very useful during the day and the potentially strong sun or evening mosquitoes.

A sun hat and sunglasses are a must for both the Andean sun and the coast, together with a good sunscreen.

On the coastal section of your trip, lightweight natural fibres can be more comfortable than synthetic. If wearing shorts and shirt then you must always remember to apply sunscreen, there may be shade in the old streets of Cartagena but it can be very easy to get caught out.

Comfortable sandals with Velcro tie are advisable. All though dress codes in Colombia are fairly liberal, some respect should be used when entering religious buildings, and government buildings. Shorts are NOT permitted in official government buildings.

Money matters

The local currency of the Republic of Colombia is the Peso. The ISO 4217 (International standard currency code) code is COP. However the official symbol for the peso is \$.

Coin Values: 20, 50, 100, 200, 500 peso.

Note Value: 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 peso.

Travellers cheques should be changed in the major cities as options for changing in more rural areas are greatly reduced. Many of the large chain hotels will change your traveler's cheques, however you will find that the rate you receive will be much less than that of Dollars cash. If changing dollars large bills are easier to change, therefore it is advisable to bring 100's, 50's, and 20's.

Credits cards are accepted in hotels and some restaurants. All major banks in Colombia generally except worldwide debit cards i.e. VISA. Again, the more rural the location the greater the risk of some ATM's not accepting your card, and therefore there being less chance of finding another. It is always a good idea contacting your bank and credit card supplier to advise them that you will be using your card in Colombia.

Tipping and gifts

In many restaurants in Colombia a service charge will have already been added to the bill. Therefore there is no need to pay a tip unless you otherwise feel the need.

You may want to tip guides and drivers etc during your journey but this is all down to personal preference and should only be done if you feel the person providing the service warrants it.

Consideration for the future must be taken into account when handing out gifts, especially to children. Pens, Pencils and paper are a good idea. Money is not, this can unfortunately breed a dependency on the foreign traveler. A piece of food can always be an option, again though sweets etc may not be the perfect choice for a child who does not have access to good health care or even the simplest of personal health utensils.

The best way to contribute to Colombia is through a recognized charity or contact Colombia57 for advice.

Food and Drink

Colombian cuisine is characterized from a mixture of European, African and indigenous cuisine.

Although there is no defined national dish, there are many candidates including Bandeja Paisa, Ajiaco, Sancocho, Arepa, tamales and Lechona.

Bogota and the central Andean region are famous for their Ajiaco. It is a soup made of chicken, corn, potatoes, avocado, and guascas, a local herb. Traditionally, cream and capers are added at the table before eating. Ajiaco is served with white rice, salad with a hint of lemon, avocado, or sweet or salty tostadas, a hearty dish for the cold mountain evenings.

Along the Caribbean coast, fish and lobster are used in mild spicy food. Coconut rice is a common dish along the coastal cities. Suero, which is a cross between yogurt and sour cream, is widely consumed, and was introduced by Arab immigrants in Barranquilla and other coastal cities. The arepa has many forms in the Caribbean region, which include *arepa limpia*, *arepa con huevo* (arepa with egg), and *arepa con queso* (arepa with cheese). An Arepa is a corn based bread.

Bandeja Paisa, a traditional dish from the Paisa region, consists of white rice, red beans, ground beef, plantain, morcilla (Blood sausage with rice), chorizo, arepa, avocado and a fried egg. Along with *Ajiaco*, the *bandeja paisa* is considered to be one of the national dishes.

Sancocho is a popular soup originating from the Cauca Valley region. It combines vegetables and poultry or fish with recipes differing from one region to the other, but usually contains yucca, maize, and is frequently eaten with banana slices.

It is always safer to drink bottled water whilst in Colombia; there is a plentiful supply in any *tienda*, or bottle shop.

Aguapanela is popular refreshment in Colombia, and some neighboring countries. This is made by dissolving a block of sugarcane in water and adding lime juice.

Beer is very popular in Colombia; there are five beers brewed within the country. All the beers have regional roots but found throughout Colombia. The majority are now owned by SAB MILLER plc; Club Colombia has a refined taste and is deemed the most exclusive beer to drink, Aguila and Aguila light are drunk predominantly on the coast of Colombia with its blend of bitter and sweet tastes is very refreshing, and Pilsen from the Medellin with its "original taste of reward". The other two beers brewed in Colombia are Poker from Caldas, and the popular Costeña from Antioquia.

The other Local brews are Rum and Aguardiente, both are regional once again, and a hot bed of discussion depending on your birth place, regarding which is the best!

Ron de Caldas is generally considered the finest rum in Colombia, even winning a prize in Belgium in 2005.

Aguardiente is alcoholic drink derived from sugarcane. It is widely consumed at Colombian parties, and ranges in potency from 20% to 40%. Aguardiente is derived from sugarcane and aniseed flavours. It is not uncommon to see one bottle on the table and glasses of water to quash the fire! The most common brands are Antioqueña and Crystal.

Juan Valdez is probably the most famous coffee you can buy in Colombia. This marketing phenomena was started in 1959 and has been promoting Colombian coffee ever since.

Security and Crime

For all its bad publicity Colombia is generally very safe. As in every capital city or large scale city, care must be taken not to "dar papaya", to give anyone the opportunity to see your apparent wealth.

Care must be taken at night hailing taxis from the street, always try and call a taxi, either from your hotel or the restaurant or bar you are visiting.

Common sense should be used when visiting any foreign country and Colombia is no exception.

Always use the safe deposit box in your hotel room or at the hotel reception. Never carry your passport with you during day trips or walking about day or night, but always carry a photo copy in case of police checks etc.