

CRACKING UP: yellow tube sponges adorn a reef crack at Providencia Island

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NIGHT LIFE: Caribbean reef squid on a night dive at Taganga

COLOMBIA

COLOMBIA IS a country of wild contrasts. For all the beauty of the people and the countryside, there is the spectre of political insurgents and the drug cartels. Nevertheless, the past eight years have seen a series of reforms and crackdowns that has seen the country rehabilitating itself.

Spend any amount of time in Colombia and you'll learn that many things have changed. True, there are no-go areas where kidnapping is a threat, and swathes of countryside are still given over to the cultivation of marijuana and coca, but you have to understand that this is an immense country, and there are plenty of places where tourists can visit with the same level

of safety you would expect anywhere in South America (for up-to-date information on the no-go areas, go to www.fco.gov.uk).

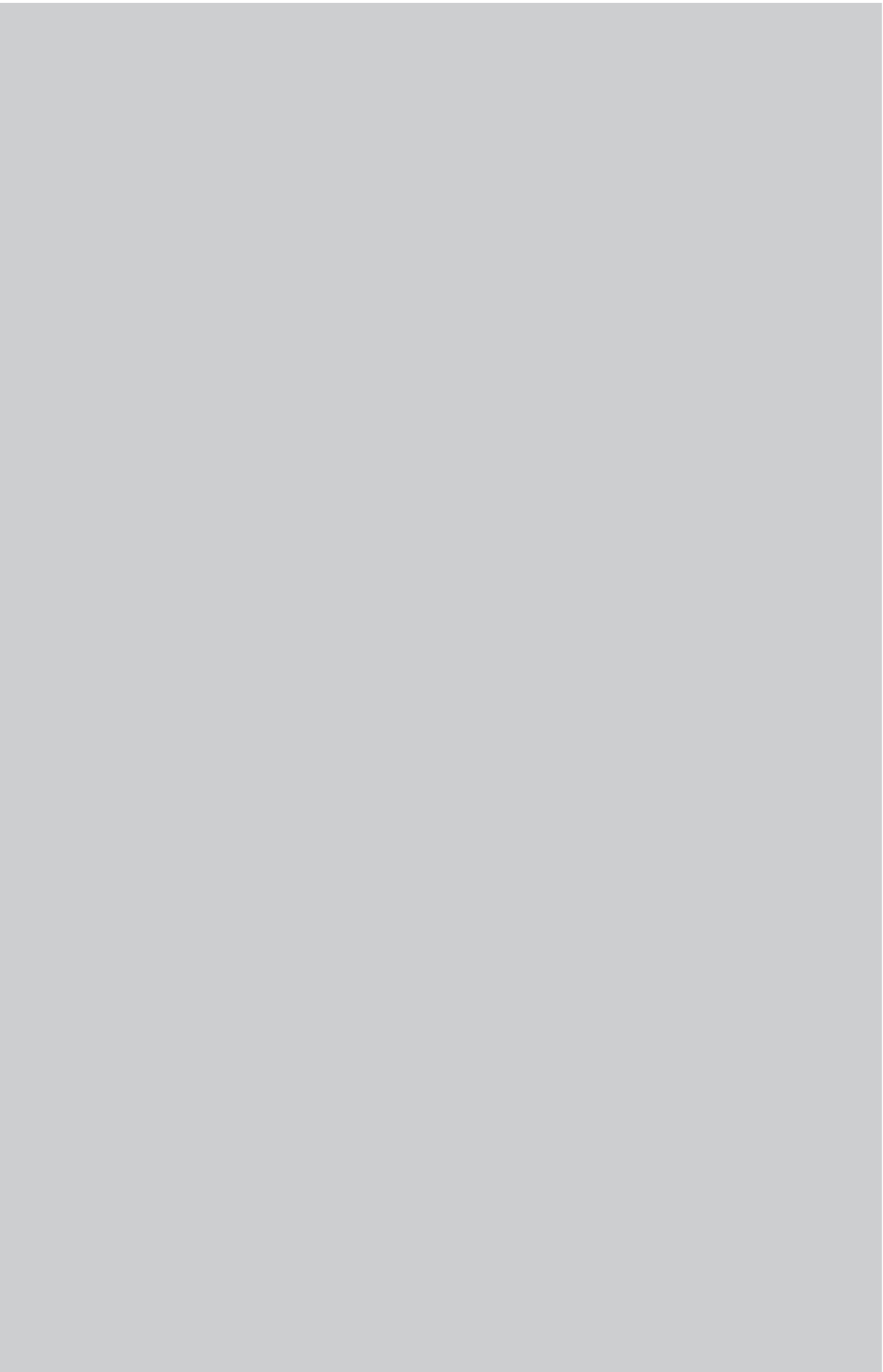
So the tourism industry is gradually establishing itself and most of the key infrastructures are already in place, albeit with a few local eccentricities. It is a particularly rewarding country for the eco-tourist or backpacker, as costs are low and there is a wealth of opportunity for exploring pre-Columbian sites, coffee plantations and rainforests. I thought the food was excellent, with cutting-edge cuisine in the towns and delicious fresh seafood on the coast. Cartagena, meanwhile, is a truly entrancing city, with the bonus of blue-water diving just offshore.

The dive centres I visited all had good day boats and acceptable kit for hire. You are offered excellent coffee everywhere you go, and it is delicious, but you have to drink plenty of water to remain hydrated. In general, the diving is interesting, but not spectacular. You wouldn't go all the way just to go diving, but if you weigh it up alongside the nightlife, nature and sheer romance of the country, Colombia becomes a seriously attractive proposition.

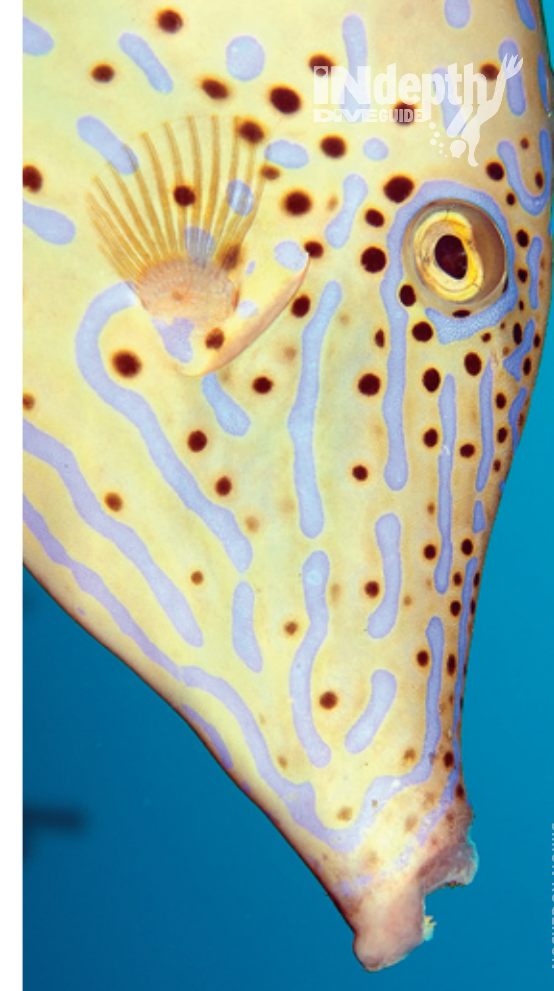
SANTA MARTA AND TAGANGA

One of the oldest coastal settlements in Colombia, Santa Marta is located close to one of the coast's greatest attractions, Tayrona National Park, with its monkey forests and white sand beaches. Nearby is the laid-back fishing village of Taganga, home to several dive centres including the





WHAT'S YOUR SCENE?: [clockwise from this photograph] yellow sponges at Islas del Rosario; scrawled filefish; Isla Providencia from the air; beaugregory damselfish



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German-owned Dive Center.

Equipped with a fast and comfortable catamaran, they take divers along the arid coastline to a series of coral reefs.

The diving here is best described as 'benchmark Caribbean'; interesting, but hardly spectacular. It's a lucky day when you see any big fish, but the reefs are home to plenty of crustaceans and the smaller reef fish, notably the spotted drum, the French angelfish and several types of tang. The reefs themselves are mostly composed of some hard coral interspersed with what local guides refer to collectively as 'soft corals'. These are mostly the gorgonian subspecies known as spiny sea rods, and around Taganga they form great swaying fields frequented by trumpetfish.

The best dives here are at night, when the moray eels are out hunting, and it's easy to find shrimps out on the stony coral. I had a superb encounter with a big-fin reef squid here, and the resident lizardfish are the fattest I have seen anywhere, reaching the proportions of a crocodilefish.

I would recommend the place for backpackers or long-term travellers who want to do a bit of diving and enjoy the laid-back atmosphere of a typical Colombian beach town. It's not remotely dangerous and the local bars serve great mojitos and have happy hours that seem to go on forever.

CARTAGENA AND ISLAS DEL ROSARIO

Alongside Colombia's national parks and rainforest, its greatest tourist attraction is the city of Cartagena (pronounced 'carta-hey-na'). Its labyrinth of narrow streets and bustling squares is a near-perfect time capsule of 16th-century colonial architecture, all encased in seven miles of massive fortified walls and overlooked by a fort still bristling with cannon. This is the Cartagena of *Love in the Time of Cholera* fame; author Gabriel García Márquez still owns a property in the historical quarter, where the ornate streets are home to Colombia's artistic in-crowd. With some of the best bars and restaurants in Latin America and a boutique hotel on every corner, it's got to be one of the hippest cities to visit.

And it has diving just offshore, at the Rosario Islands. You can either visit the islands by speedboat out of Cartagena (a 45-minute journey) or base yourself on one of the islands. Accommodation is variable – I stayed on Pirate Island, where it was just about fit for purpose, but crying out for renovation. I advise either staying on Cartagena or booking into one of the more upmarket islands.

I visited some of the local reefs with the support of Cartagena-based dive centre [redacted], a friendly and professional outfit. The

strongest point here is the variety and size of the sponges, but the hard coral is mostly dead and covered in algae. In terms of fish, this was the poorest site I visited in Colombia. There were a few sightings of triggerfish, filefish and scorpionfish, but for the most part the water column was a fished-out void. Night dives were more entertaining, with a parade of crustaceans large and small.

ISLA PROVIDENCIA

Far offshore – closer, in fact, to Nicaragua – lie the islands of San Andrés and Providencia. They have by far the best diving on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Here the water is clearer, being less prone to coastal runoff than at Cartagena or Taganga. I didn't dive at San Andrés but flew straight on to Providencia, less developed and reputed to be the superior of the two.

Providencia's diving is above average for the Caribbean. You get shoals of snapper and grunts, and various other schooling species. There are also Nassau grouper, nurse sharks and great barracuda, indicating that the reefs are still able to support sizeable predators. Visibility is typically 20–30m and the reefs are smothered in sponges, star corals and gorgonians. There's even a wreck, but the staff at

[redacted] steered me away from that option, saying that you can't get inside the





ON THE LOOKOUT: a great barracuda patrols the reef dropoff at Providencia

structure and there aren't many fish.

Providencia's underwater scene is pretty, but there aren't many surprises – you could get the same sort of thing at any number of Caribbean destinations. What makes it special is the place itself, with its wilderness and reggae culture. The islanders are mostly Afro-Caribbean people, English-speaking and with a prominent Rastafarian influence. It is a taste of Caribbean as it was 20 years ago, all bush rum and beach shacks, albeit with the optional comforts of mid-market, air-conditioned hotels.

It is undoubtedly a charming island, but to get here you have to fly from Cartagena to San Andres, then onto Providencia. If you're flying from the UK, that means four flights each way, with strict luggage allowances on the internal flights.

THE PACIFIC COAST

While we have focused on the Caribbean, we really need to mention Isla Malpelo, a seamount located far out into the Pacific. Why go there? Sharks – lots and lots of sharks. Silkie, hammerheads, Galápagos sharks... Malpelo even has the rare smalltooth sand tiger shark, a giant cousin

of the 'raggie' sharks you get in South Africa. Diving here is strictly for the experienced

A more mellow option is Isla Gorgona, a former prison island now noted for its wildlife both on land and underwater. It's supposed to have typically exciting eastern Pacific diving, with plenty of white-tip reef sharks, frequent manta sightings and the possibility of whale watching. We didn't experience this one first-hand, but it does sound promising.

GETTING THERE

From the UK, you either fly via an American hub, or via Madrid on Avianca or Air France. Bogota, the capital, is an inland transfer hub, and while it has its attractions, there's no need to go there unless you need to connect to the Pacific coast. You're better off flying direct to Cartagena. Tourist visas are free, but there is a departure tax of \$30.

WHAT TO TAKE

Weight restrictions are quite strict on internal flights, so you need to pare down your dive kit as much as possible. I hired a

BC and regulator everywhere I went. The weight allowance from San Andrés to Providencia is a rather silly 10kg (plus hand luggage). Probably the best option is to arrange to leave some of your luggage in your Cartagena hotel, and collect it on the way back. If you're diving the Pacific coast or Taganga, take a 5mm wetsuit and hood; at Providencia and Rosario, a 3mm or rash vest is all you need. Otherwise, it's the usual tropical kit – sunglasses and a hat, mosquito repellent and a good book.

CONTACTS

General info: www.turismocolombia.com
Tour operator: www.aqua-firma.co.uk

