

South America

Yes, I took my kids to Colombia

The name may suggest drug cartels and violence but **Helena de Bertodano** visits a family-friendly country keen to escape its past

It is nearly midnight when I hear a knock on my hotel door. At first I am alarmed. I am alone with my three young children (my husband is not joining us for several days) in Cartagena, Colombia, a country that doesn't feature on most lists of family-friendly destinations.

As a teenager in the late Eighties I backpacked around South America, but skipped Colombia because of its dangerous reputation. Even now the Foreign and Commonwealth Office warns of a "high threat of terrorism and criminal activity". But Colombian friends persuaded me that, if you took reasonable care, the risks were minimal. Plus, the country was astoundingly beautiful, with lots of unusual and fun activities for families.

My children are asleep but I am awake listening to the salsa music drifting in from the vibrant plaza in the old walled city, intermingled with the clapping of horses pulling carriages along the cobbled streets.

So at first I ignore the knocking. Then I

hear a whisper: "Is it true that you want to buy a fishing rod?" I open the door to find one of the exceptionally friendly hotel staff apologising for disturbing me but explaining that there is a man outside who has heard that we are looking for a rod.

My two sons, aged 11 and 9, had spent the day scouring the streets for fishing gear after spotting fishermen hauling in impressive-sized fish as they stood knee-deep in the waters around the city. While I tried to interest them in the rusty cannons positioned to guard the city from the likes of Sir Francis Drake who famously sacked Cartagena, all they could talk about was catching fish. The medieval plazas and bougainvillea-shrouded balconies might charm adults, but the city holds less attraction for children, especially as its beaches are muddy and unswimmable.

I briefly managed to capture their attention in the Palacio de la Inquisición, which has an impressive display of instruments of torture, including a rack and garrote. But we were due to travel the next day to the Islas del Rosario, an archipelago of 27 small islands off the coast, and to be on water unable to fish was my children's idea of torture.

Word travels fast in Cartagena and here on the steps of the hotel is Byron, a wizened man with a selection of fishing gear. I wake 11-year-old Ben. Thrilled and incredulous, he comes to the door and for £9 we gain a retractable fishing rod that transforms our trip to the islands. While my daughter, 7, and I snorkel over the coral reefs, the boys fish off the edge of the boat. They only catch an eel, but they are happy.

The quest for the fishing rod showed two truths about Cartagena — that this is a small city where everyone knows your business. And that most Colombians will go



out of their way to help you. On separate occasions, I lost my iPhone and camcorder and didn't expect to see either again. But once word got out, both were returned to me. Most surprising was the camcorder, which emerged a couple of days later from the backpack of a guide on a horse in the mountains.

Cartagena is just one stop on a three-week trip to Colombia that included ten days in the central coffee region and a couple of days in Medellín, a city that until recently was inseparable from the word "cartel" and the late drug lord Pablo Escobar.

The key to the success of our trip is Geoff Chew, a Briton who runs the lovely Casa La Fe, our hotel in Cartagena that pulls off the difficult trick of being both boutique and family friendly. We had no intentions to travel inland, let alone to Medellín, but Chew also owns a *casita* (small guest house) in the picturesque town of Salento — accessible from Medellín or Pereira — that he rents out to hotel guests. We see little sign of the country's violent underbelly. In a small mountain town a man on a bicycle wears a T-shirt with the slogan "No más Farc, no más muertes" (No more Farc, no more deaths). Farc, the Fuerzas Armadas

Revolucionarias de Colombia, is the guerrilla organisation responsible for much of the misery of the past few decades. Now its power is diminished but the fear remains and explains the heavy army presence that we encounter everywhere we go.

In a remote picturesque valley a group of young soldiers seems relaxed as they guard the entrance to a popular tourist trail. They joke and eat ice cream but carry grenade launchers and assault rifles. Strangely, they are desperate to take pictures of themselves on their mobile phones posing with our children — they say that they see few Westerners.

A few miles up the coast from Cartagena is Manzanillo, where the beach is far nicer — as long as you don't mind sharing it with a few pigs. If you stay, as we did, in the Hotel Kohsamui you can watch your children on the beach from hammocks on the large *palapa* (covered deck) while eating grilled fish and coconut rice. We also tour the mangroves in an old wooden boat steered stoically by the taciturn Luis. At first we marvel at the herons rising from the trees that arch over the water creating a tangled tunnel for the boat. But soon we start fidgeting. "Hormigas," Luis says, matter-of-factly. "Ants." The heat of our bodies draws the



ants out of the woodwork and they are stinging our bottoms. The phrase "ants in your pants" suddenly makes sense.

Farther north we spend an entertaining morning at Volcán El Totumo, a benign volcano that spews mud not lava. A rickety staircase leads to the top of what looks like a large termite hill and visitors are invited to "swim" in the crater. As we step in, the mud belches, big bubbles rising to the surface. The children find it hysterical. Afterwards we run through the village in our cloaks of dripping mud to the lakeside where a trio of local women wait to throw water over us. Days afterwards we still find mud behind our ears and between our toes.

After we exhaust all possibilities in and around Cartagena, we fly to Medellín with Viva-Colombia, a new low-cost airline launched this summer that makes travelling around Colombia a cinch. For just over £10 (if you book early enough) you can fly between most of Colombia's major cities in new aircraft that run — in our experience — on time.

Driving from the airport as the sun sets, Medellín spreads out in the valley ahead, the smart residential areas and so-called Milla de Oro (Golden Mile) below us, the shanty houses ascending the other side. The city still has dangerous areas, but we see a modern dynamic place and meet a

people fiercely proud of the "City of Eternal Spring", so named because of its pleasant year-round climate. We stayed in El Poblado, an attractive neighbourhood of small parks and restaurants that feels safe to wander around — as we do — in the evening. We have breakfast on the roof of the Diez Hotel and enjoy the panoramic views before setting off on a bus journey through the



mountains to Salento. Geoff Chew's charming red and white *casita* with a large deck and garden is at the heart of the action. Soon after daybreak, the dogs start barking, cockerels crowing and geese honking as they waddle up and down the road outside our window. Traders hawk their wares — "tamales calientes!" — and the noise makes a lie-in out of the question. But it doesn't matter as there is so much to get up for.

First there is the town itself, with its brightly coloured houses and excellent coffee shops to kickstart your day. Then there is the countryside — long treks on horseback or foot through beautiful cloud forest beneath hills dotted with towering wax palms. In the evenings we take our pick of the many local restaurants that serve trout and *patacones* (fried green plantains) and almost nothing else.

We visit a local coffee farm, where the children harvest coffee beans, and spend a day at Panaca, a farm park with a twist-pigs race round a track over obstacles with surprising agility. Best of all, as far as my sons are concerned, are the myriad opportunities to fish for trout in local streams with bamboo rods.

Our final stop is Parque Tayrona, a protected area back on the Caribbean coast. It is somewhat overhyped and will drill a hole in your pocket — return bus journeys from Cartagena set our family of five back £250, topped off with another fairly hefty fee to get in. We book the £7-a-night hammocks rather than the £250 "Ecohabs" to compensate. The hammocks are in Arrecifes, a few miles inside the park, and although a clapped-out minibus takes you part of the way, the last couple of miles are on foot. The walk is quite brutal in the midday sun but is eased by spotting lots of monkeys in the canopy overhead. We check into our hammocks — in so far as you can check into an open-air piece of cloth — and go to the beach, which is flanked by shacks serving delicious ceviche and baked cheese bread.

That night we hear the odd falling coconut, but sleep as well as we did in our smart Cartagena hotel.

Colombia's tourist board says that the only risk travellers face now "is that you will want to stay". Three weeks was long enough. But I'm very glad that we went.

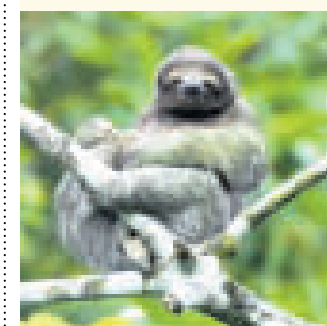
Need to know

Helena de Bertodano was a guest of Casa La Fe (00575 664 0306, casalafe.com) where rooms cost £99-£159 a night. Set around an attractive courtyard, the 14-room hotel includes a rooftop swimming pool and delicious breakfasts featuring *arepas* (corn pancakes). The hotel also rents out a three-bedroom house in Salento for £80 per night and can book all local travel. In Manzanillo, the Kohsamui Hotel (kohsamuicartagena.com) has rooms from £70 a night. The Diez hotel (diezhotel.com) in Medellín has rooms from £125. Helena flew with VivaColombia (vivacolombia.co) which has flights from Cartagena to Medellín and other cities starting at only £10.

Getting there

American Airlines (0844 4997300, aa.com) has flights from Heathrow to Bogotá via Miami from £721pp return. Last Frontiers (01296 653000, lastfrontiers.com) has a 10-day Classic Colombia tour visiting Bogotá, Vila de Leyva, Cartagena and Tayrona from £3,056pp. Audley (01993 838 000, audley.co.uk) has a 10-day basics tour from £2,250pp visiting Bogotá and its surroundings as well as Cartagena.

Latin American adventures



Costa Rica (age 10+)

Witness the Arenal volcano spurting lava from its crater, bathe in hot springs and go zip-lining through the rainforest on a 15-night tour. Teenagers can marvel at huge soldier ants, three-toed sloths and view colourful birds in the Monteverde cloud forest. The trip ends with four days on a Pacific coast beach. **Details** 15-night tailor-made trips cost from £3,225 per adult, £2,917 per child, including flights, some meals, all transfers and excursions. (020-8758 4774, sunvil.co.uk/traveller)

Brazil (7+)

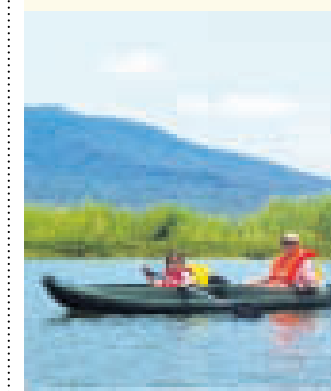
Combine a break in Rio de Janeiro with a tailor-made trip to the spectacular Iguazu Falls and wildlife spotting in the Pantanal, one of the world's largest wetlands. Take in sights such as the Christ the Redeemer statue from the granite peak of Corcovado mountain and enjoy Copacabana beach. **Details** 11 days cost from £3,899 per adult, £3,499 per child, including flights and most meals. (0845 0514567, www.families-worldwide.co.uk)

Chile and Argentina (8+)

Patagonia is a spectacular wilderness incorporating the granite peaks of Torres del Paine National Park and the icy terrain of Los Glaciares National Park. Stay at a ranch where you can go horse riding and sheep shearing with the gauchos. The tailor-made trip is booked with stays in Santiago and Buenos Aires. **Details** 12 days cost from £3,273 per adult and £2,693 per child including flights, accommodation, transfers and most meals. (020-8747 8315, journeylatinamerica.co.uk)

Nicaragua (10+)

If your children are at their happiest messing about in the water, this 15-day group trip will keep them entertained with kayaking around the tropical



Las Islas Islands on Lake Nicaragua, surfing off the Pacific coast and swimming from the Caribbean beaches of Corn Island. **Details** 14 nights cost from £2,223 per adult, £1,826 per child including flights, a driver and tour leader, B&B and some meals. (0844 4990901, explore.co.uk)

Mexico (7+)

Riviera Maya, 40 minutes' drive from the high rises of Cancun, makes an ideal base for a beach holiday with adventurous activities on the doorstep (and no need for any inoculations or malaria pills). Stay at the stylish Rosewood Mayakoba resort, situated on a mile-long arc of white sand backed by rainforest with an infinity pool and sleek spa. **Details** A week costs from £2,090 per adult and £790 per child including flights, transfers and B&B. (0845 1244455, bushbaby.travel)



Cuba (5+)

Drive past Havana's crumbling colonial buildings in vintage cars on this soft adventure holiday combining the Cuban capital with beach stays and a visit to the World Heritage Centre of Trinidad. **Details** 11 nights on this group trip cost from £1,999 per adult, £1,649 per child, including return flights from London, transfers, accommodation and most meals. (0845 8639601, exodus.co.uk)

Peru (7+)

A train journey to reach the Lost City of Machu Picchu is one of the highlights of this adrenalin-fuelled trip that includes visits to the seal and bird colonies at Bellasos Islands and riding 40ft sand dunes in buggies in the Peruvian desert. **Details** 15 days cost from £3,155 per adult and £2,929 per child including flights, most meals and transport. (020-7736 3968, wildfrontiers.co.uk)

Ecuador/Galapagos (8+)

A cruise around the Galapagos Islands is one of the great natural wonders. Fly into the capital Quito and stay at the Napo Wildlife Centre in the Amazon jungle. **Details** 15 nights cost from £4,699 per adult, £3,318 per child including flights, cruise and most meals (01803 866965, familytours.co.uk) Minimum ages are recommendations but not strict limits. **Liz Bird**