

On Safari in Colombia – In Search of the Jaguar!

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Bogotá Pre-extension

Day -1 Fly Bogotá

Day 0/1 Bogotá; Botero & Gold Museums, touring

Main tour

Day 1 Fly Bogotá

Day 2 Arrive Bogotá; transfer to Restrepo

Day 3 Wildlife-watching excursions from Restrepo

Day 4 Transfer to Juan Solito; Hato la Aurora

Day 5/9 Mammal and bird safaris from Hato la Aurora

Day 10 Transfer to Yopal; fly Bogotá

Day 11 Arrive UK

Departs

February

Focus

The mammals and birds of the Colombia Llanos with a special effort to find Jaguar

Grading

A – see paragraph at end of itinerary

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code COL08)



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Introduction

Colombia has undoubtedly been one of the most exciting emerging wildlife destinations over the last ten years, and this trend looks set to continue as new regions open up, revealing a wealth of new wildlife-watching opportunities. This new two-centre tour visits the Llanos region, a vast, tropical lowland savannah straddling Colombia and Venezuela, packed with a wealth of birds, mammals and other wildlife, topped by South America's apex predator, the Jaguar!

Over the last few years, Jaguar sightings have become very reliable during a specific date window, during which dry conditions allow us to access key territories which have been undisturbed by hunting pressure for at least forty years. Thankfully, there is a comfortable lodge in this wilderness, Hato la Aurora, and this is our base for six nights, allowing us convenient vehicular access to otherwise inaccessible locations and the abundant wildlife which they protect. Before we reach the Llanos, we'll ease ourselves into the tour with a couple of nights in a wonderful little family-run guest house close to the village of Restrepo, which sits in the transition zone between the foothills of Colombia's eastern Andes and the low-lying Llanos.

Here we'll target three endemic primates in the form of Ornate Titi, Brumback's Night Monkey (we know several nest holes for this species) and Colombian Squirrel Monkey. The area also produces regular Giant Anteater sightings, and our guides have even seen Jaguarundi here in the past. Of course, birds will be our constant companions, with a dazzling array of wetland and open country species possible, including Venezuelan Troupial, Pied Water Tyrant, a number of wintering North American warblers, a variety of hummingbirds and tanagers, seedeaters, flycatchers and raptors, along with herons, ibises, kingfishers and other wetland species.

Having enjoyed the wildlife delights of Restrepo, we'll move into the heart of the Llanos region where we'll start our quest to see South America's apex terrestrial predator, the majestic Jaguar. Our days will be structured to maximise our time in the field, with a particular focus on being out early in the morning and in the late afternoon/evening, when Jaguars are most active. We'll be in 4x4 vehicles with expert trackers, so our chances of finding a Jaguar are very good. Our local team have been working on this special project with the reserve since 2019, so we're confident of finding and enjoying extended encounters with these big cats.

However, while Jaguars are our top target for the tour, we'll be sure to enjoy a host of other special wildlife along the way, and that includes the potential for other cat species! We know Pumas are present here and our night drives on the ranch, an activity which is in its infancy, offer the tantalising possibility of a Puma, Ocelot or Jaguarundi (no promises!). Other mammals present include Lowland (Brazilian) Tapir, Giant Anteater, Southern Tamandua, both Neotropical and Giant River Otters, White-tailed Deer, Crab-eating Fox, Capybara, Crab-eating Raccoon, Collared Peccary, Black Agouti, and several species of primates and armadillo. Birds will also be on the menu (the reserve has a bird list of over 380 species), especially during periods when mammal-spotting is quiet, and a selection of reptiles include Green Anaconda and Orinoco Crocodile.

All of this evokes memories of the Venezuelan Llanos and Hato Pinero, a favourite Naturetrek destination back in the 1990s and early 2000s. With travel to Venezuela currently off-limits, we can't wait to start sending groups to this equally exciting new destination in Colombia.

Consider joining us for an optional two-night pre-tour cultural extension in Bogotá. Post-tour extensions are available on request, targeting birds and/or mammals.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Bogotá

We leave London Heathrow in the evening on a direct overnight flight with Avianca, to the Colombian capital, Bogotá. Regional departures can be organised either by way of BA connections via Heathrow, or by flying with Air France or KLM through Paris or Amsterdam (in which case a night's accommodation in Bogotá will be needed). Please ask us for advice when booking.

Day 2

Arrive Bogotá; transfer Restrepo

Arriving in Bogotá in the very early morning local time (just before 4.00am), we will nevertheless feel ready to go due to the time difference between London and Bogotá. Once we've cleared customs and claimed our baggage, we'll be met by our guide and driver and embark on the ninety-mile, four-hour drive south-east to Villavicencio. Surrounded by mountainous scenery for the first two-thirds of the drive (we'll stop for some great coffee and a leg stretch), we gradually drop in altitude and by the time we reach Villavicencio, at just 470m, it will feel distinctly tropical, with lush foliage all around.

Our base for the first two nights of the holiday is Rancho Camana, a small private reserve thirty minutes north of Villavicencio. It offers simple but comfortable accommodation and tasty home-cooked meals. It is an ideal stopover for those venturing into the Llanos further to the north-east, and has two hectares of gardens (with feeders) and regenerating forest. The owners of Rancho Camaná run a foundation for conservation, nature education and community tourism in the region. It will be good to support this family-owned, small-scale ecotourism and conservation project.

We anticipate arriving for late breakfast/brunch, after which we can familiarize ourselves with the common garden birds, along with some of the more interesting species such as Barred Antshrike, Gilded Barbet, Little Cuckoo, Chestnut-eared Aracari, Pectoral Sparrow, Rufous-and-white Wren, Turquoise Tanager, Straight-billed and Plain-brown Woodcreepers, and Rufous-fronted Thornbird.

Later in the afternoon, we'll make our first foray into the surrounding rough pasture to look for one of the continent's most enigmatic mammals, the striking Giant Anteater. These specialist insectivores roam the open grasslands in the early evenings, in search of the ant and termite colonies where they feast with their long sticky tongues: our local guides know exactly which areas they like to frequent. While searching for the anteater, we should pick up a number of attractive open country and water birds, such as Hoatzin, White-bearded Flycatcher, Wood Stork, Whistling Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Amazonian Motmot, Red-bellied Macaw, Scarlet and White Ibises, Limpkin, Great Potoo and others.

Day 3

Restrepo (Rancho Camana)

After an early breakfast, we will head out to nearby forest patches which are home to three interesting endemic primate species: Ornate Titi Monkey, Colombian Squirrel Monkey and Brumback's Night Monkey. The Squirrel Monkeys are relatively easy to find, as they move around in large, extended family groups up to forty strong. The Ornate Titi, which has a dense, fluffy, coat, white ears and forehead, and grey hands and feet, is separated by over 400km from its nearest relative, the White-tailed Titi. Typical birds of the gallery forest include both Spot-breasted and Cream-coloured Woodpeckers, Two-banded Puffbird, White-chinned Jacamar, Pale-bellied Hermit, Yellow-billed Nunbird, Lettered Aracari and both Swallow and Black-faced Tanagers.

After lunch back at the lodge we will analyse our options, one of which is the nearby reserve of Bosque Bavaria, which offers some exciting potential new birds such as Black-faced Antbird, Moustached and White-chested Puffbirds, Sooty-capped Hermit, Green-fronted Lancebill, Chestnut-eared Aracari and Yellow-tufted Woodpecker, amongst many others.

However, we may prefer another drive out into the grasslands to look again for Giant Anteater and this will be prioritised if we were unsuccessful yesterday evening. Dinner will be back at the lodge.

Day 4

Transfer to Juan Solito; Hato la Aurora

This morning, we travel to the impressive Hato la Aurora, deep in the Colombian Llanos. We'll take most of the day completing this 275-mile drive to the north-east, stopping occasionally for leg stretches, loo breaks and some light birding, along with lunch. Arriving in the late afternoon, we will settle in at Juan Solito Ecolodge, our base for the next six nights.



Set within the 17,000-hectare ranch, the Ecolodge is a simple but comfortable and homely base for our exploration of the Llanos. There are seven en suite rooms, which are all screened and have a fan. The charm of the property is in its unique character and history, having been owned and managed by the Barragan family for almost fifty years. The

wider ranch was once part of the Jesuit Caribabare ranch. In 1974, a portion of it was purchased by the Barragán Mujica family. Since 2000, the Barragán Plata family has been ranching in conjunction with ecotourism and conservation.

The food is tasty and features plenty of local produce and fresh fruit, and the lodge's open lounge area includes a tea and coffee station, as well as a fridge stocked with cold beers and soft drinks. There is also a Wi-Fi connection in the dining room area. The lodge is an ideal base for wildlife watchers, with a vast swathe of wetlands, grasslands and gallery forest on its doorstep. The Ariporo river flows next to the lodge and might be a focus for a boat trip (depending on levels), while safari drives enable further exploration of the surrounding grasslands and wetlands. Rubber boots are provided for wildlife walks.

Days 5-9

The Llanos from Hato la Aurora

We have five full days to explore the Llanos from this wonderful base, by means of daily safari drives and wildlife walks.

Each morning will comprise an early start, breakfast, and a safari drive looking for the mammals and birds of the reserve. On most days, we will enjoy lunch in one of the reserve's remote out-houses, where we enjoy delicious food and fresh tropical fruits, refresh ourselves with ice-cold beverages, relax in a hammock and enjoy the lovely bird-rich gardens. Our safari drives will continue into the afternoons and evening in our search for Jaguars, enjoying other wildlife as we go. After a refreshing sundowner, we'll return to the lodge for a relaxed evening.



Looking for Jaguars will be our primary focus, especially in the early mornings and evenings, when the cats are most active. Revered by indigenous communities, this impressive animal has a special allure. They are beautifully marked, mysterious and powerful, and the Jaguar is undoubtedly one of South America's most iconic species. Yet, until Jaguar tourism took off in the early 2000s in the Pantanal, they were very rarely seen by locals, let alone tourists. At Hato La Aurora, the owners have decided to tolerate livestock losses, and have taken an enlightened, wildlife-friendly approach and ceased all hunting. This has helped the population of Jaguars to recover and, with the help of the cat conservation organisation Panthera, the ranch has been studying its resident Jaguars for over fifteen years. To date, over 70 Jaguars have been recorded in the area. While sightings can never be guaranteed, with the expert knowledge of our local guide and dedicated time in the field, we stand a very good chance of finding one of these majestic big cats over the duration of our tour. Although sightings are not as frequent or as close as those of habituated Jaguars in the northern Pantanal, here we can enjoy the thrill of searching for them on our own, away from any crowds and noisy outboard motors. Our searches will sometimes involve long hours

in the field, often in hot, humid conditions, as we follow tracks in our quest for these remarkable but elusive animals.

Aside from the Jaguar, Hato la Aurora is a haven for a wealth of other animals, including Puma, Ocelot (although we would need a large slice of luck to see either), Lowland Tapir, Giant Anteater, Southern Tamandua, both Neotropical and Giant River Otters, White-tailed Deer, Crab-eating Fox, Capybara, Crab-eating Raccoon, Collared Peccary, Black Agouti, Tufted Capuchin, Colombian Squirrel Monkey, Giant and Llanos Long-nosed Armadillos, and the



Capybaras and Spectacled Caiman

magnificent Green Anaconda, which Hollywood has unfortunately cast (wrongly) as a man-eating villain. Individuals measuring up to an astonishing seven metres have been recorded here! There are also abundant Spectacled Caimans and Green Iguanas, while the endangered Orinoco Crocodile is found in small numbers.

When the mammal-spotting is proving quiet, we will enjoy the wealth of birdlife on the reserve (which has a list of over 380 species). The wetter parts of the reserve are awash with herons, egrets, ducks, storks, and ibises, while Horned Screamer, Orinoco Goose, Anhinga, Sunbittern, Burrowing Owl, Agami Heron and King Vulture are particular highlights. Meanwhile, around the lodge and in patches of gallery forest, we will see Scarlet Macaw, Brown-throated Parakeet, Festive, Mealy and Orange-winged Parrots, tanagers, euphonias and flycatchers, to name just a few.

On two of our evenings here, we will undertake an evening night safari in an effort to see if we can find a Puma, and other nocturnal mammals (such as Crab-eating Fox and Crab-eating Raccoon) together with nightjars and other nocturnal birds. Each night safari lasts for two and a half hours, and your guide will have a thermal scope.



Ranching at Hato la Aurora

Along the Ariporo River, which flows near the lodge, both Giant and Neotropical Otters have territories, while Colombian Red Howler Monkeys live in the gallery forests flanking the river. (Any boat rides will be dependent on water levels. All Jaguar safaris are currently done on land, not by boat.)

Day 10

Transfer to Yopal; fly Bogotá

Time permitting, we will enjoy a final early morning birding session (on foot close to the lodge). After an early lunch (or packed lunch, depending on flight times), we will transfer to Yopal, a four-hour drive away. From Yopal, we fly to Bogotá for international connections.

Day 11

Arrive UK

We are due to arrive back in the UK mid-afternoon on Avianca's service direct from the Colombian capital.

PRE-TOUR BOGOTÁ HISTORY AND CULTURE EXTENSION

Day -1

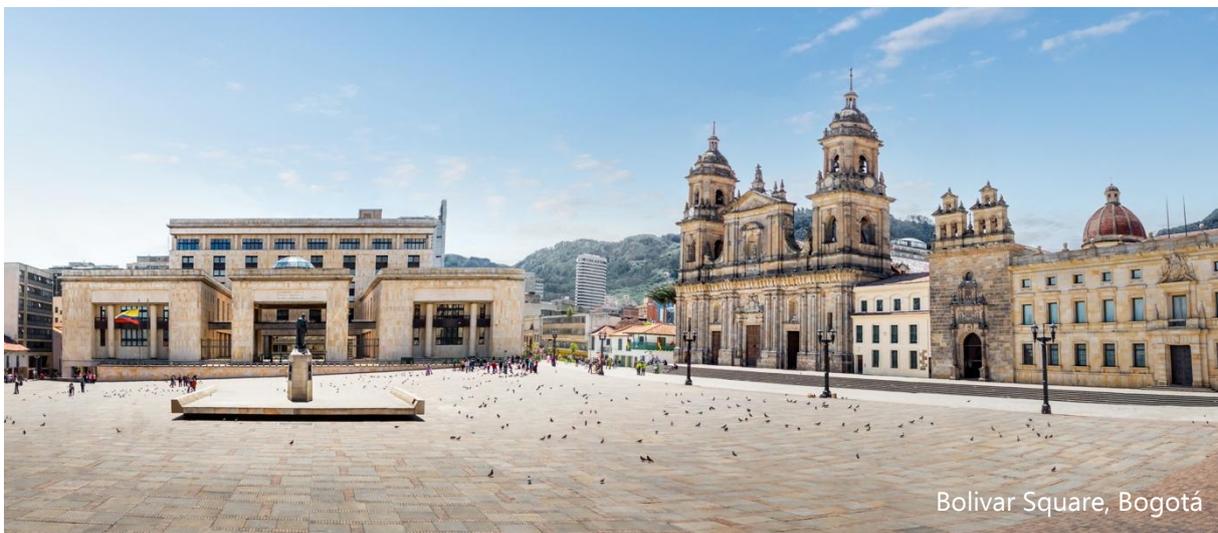
Fly Bogotá

We leave London Heathrow in the evening on a direct overnight flight with Avianca to the Colombian capital Bogotá.

Day 0

Arrive Bogotá

Arriving in Bogotá in the very early morning local time (3.40am), we will clear passport control, collect our baggage and be met by our local guide, with whom we will transfer into the historic centre of Bogotá, our base for two nights. We will be able to check into our rooms immediately. A little later, we will have a leisurely breakfast, and then after a period of rest we will be picked up by our guide for some gentle touring of historical Bogotá, lunch, and a visit to the Botero museum, an extremely highly-rated art museum located in La Candelaria neighbourhood of Bogotá. It houses mostly works by Colombian artist Fernando Botero; however, it also includes artworks by other international artists that were part of Botero's private art collection. Dinner will be at the hotel.



Bolívar Square, Bogotá

Day 1

Bogotá

Today we have a full day cultural tour including a cable car visit to Monserrate, a 3000m peak which dominates the city centre of Bogotá. The mountain, already considered sacred in pre-Columbian times when the area was inhabited by the indigenous Muisca, is a popular pilgrim destination, as well as a tourist attraction. In addition to the church near the summit, the area houses restaurants, cafeteria, souvenir shops and many smaller tourist facilities. All of downtown Bogotá, south Bogotá, and some sections of the north of the city are visible, making it a popular destination to watch over the city.



We will also enjoy a walking tour of the city, during which we'll have time around Bogotá's historical centre, a visit to the famous Gold Museum, and Simon Bolivar Square. During the day we'll taste excellent coffee, enjoy a traditional lunch and taste some exotic fruits of the region.

Day 2

Transfer to Restrepo

We will have an early start today and rendezvous with the group freshly-arrived from London who haven't done the pre-tour extension. Refer to the entry for Day 2 above.

Tour Grading & Focus

Grade A. You will need to appreciate that Neotropical mammals are largely shy and retiring, are present at low densities, and are often crepuscular or nocturnal. Although this tour spends time and effort in looking for exciting and iconic mammal species as described above, potential participants should be aware that mammals will be on view for only a small percentage of our time in the field. Anybody wishing for and expecting an African safari-type experience full of animals should consider carefully whether this is the holiday for them. Time between mammal encounters will be spent largely birdwatching (staying alert for mammals at all times of course), as birds are the most conspicuous members of the local fauna.

This is a conventional wildlife holiday with a focus on mammals, birds and general natural history. There is little walking involved and the holiday is generally suitable for those of all ages and degrees of fitness, although long hours in the field should be expected (you can opt out of any day of course to relax). The weather is usually hot and humid, and photographic opportunities should be good.

N.B. If you would like a mammal (or photography) focused holiday in Colombia with little or no focus on birds, then a tailor-made holiday could be right for you. Contact us for details – we'd be delighted to help.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included from breakfast on day 2 to lunch on day 10, as well as drinking water, coffee, juices and sundowners. We encourage you to bring a refillable water bottle. On day 10, Avianca serve an evening meal on the flight to London. You are free to buy an evening meal in the airport before boarding if you wish.

On the pre-tour cultural extension, breakfast and lunch are included.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: all items of a more personal nature such as alcoholic drinks, laundry, tips and souvenirs.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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