

Disclaimer: These notes have been created following the event held at the Society on Wednesday 17 March. We have done our best to reflect names of places and the discussion in an accurate and accessible way. For further information, please contact Sarah Woods via her website [www.sarahwoods.co.uk](http://www.sarahwoods.co.uk) or visit the Society's Collections [www.rgs.org/collections](http://www.rgs.org/collections).

## **Discovering Colombia**

### Panellists

Rita Gardner (Director)  
Sarah Woods (Author)  
Matthew Paris (Journalist)

#### **Q.** Rita Gardner:

What would you recommend as a two week trip so I get a flavour of the country?

#### **A.** Sarah Woods:

Sarah explained that this really comes down to what you want to do on your holiday, but that some of her two week trips have concentrated on the coast, such as the Caribbean Coast and the islands of San Andrés which are 800km offshore. These islands have snorkelling and diving activities, plus a marine park and conservation area. There is also an English speaking Island called Providencia, which is sleepier, and where you can eat lobster on an open fire and hang a hammock. Sarah recommended the Caribbean Coast and some of the Pacific Coast as they are in quite sharp contrast to each other, with the Caribbean coast having a more mature tourism industry, but the Pacific is still relatively unexplored by international tourists with unspoilt jungle, beaches, coastal villages and friendly people.

Furthermore, apart from the coast, Sarah recommended areas north from Bogotá, through Boyacá, which is the bread basket region of Colombia. North of Bogotá, the area has flower fields, fruit farms and a dairy industry where you can stop at the roadside to sample cheeses and cream, and also try the fruit wines. Then there's also the colonial town of Villa de Leyva, where the buildings are whitewashed and you can explore the streets, talk to the locals if you have a small degree of Spanish, and also take advantage of the walking trails in the area which exhibit lots of fossils.

For longer trips, Sarah has enjoyed visiting La Guajira, travelling up from Cartagena, through the desert using 4x4s. She says it isn't a comfortable experience as there is no big infrastructure, and you will sleep in shacks or a hammock on the beach, but that it is well worth it to see the golden sands of the desert merge into silver, and to see empty beaches with only some strings of fishing huts.

#### Matthew Paris:

Matthew gave a travel itinerary for people who may not want to 'rough it' too much, but want to experience something a little different. His suggestion concentrated on establishing a base and then radiating your travels from there, and then trying somewhere else next time. One possible location mentioned was that of Medellín, a lively town which he described as the Chicago of Colombia.

But for the very first visit, Matthew would recommend what he did, and that is to fly from Bogotá to Manizales and explore the coffee areas, do a zip wire, try rafting and then go to the Parque Nacional Los Nevados for a guided walk, hopefully up the tallest peak. You can stay in hostels in this area which will give you an opportunity to explore the coffee areas and the river valleys, and also to stay in a jungle lodge on the Rio Claro to allow you to see some rainforest.

**Q.** Rita Gardner:

What about language, I'm not a Spanish speaker so how would I fair?

**A.** Matthew Paris:

Matthew described how he has always found that the Spanish used in Colombia is much easier to understand in comparison to other countries, such as Chile, Cuba and Argentina. He described the politeness of the Colombians, and their pleasure in hearing people attempting their language which often results in them being very patient and offering to teach you.

Sarah Woods:

Sarah agreed with Matthew's comments, and compared Colombian Spanish with the concept of the Queen's English, and recommended Colombia as a good place to learn the language. She mentioned that there are some good Spanish schools that will allow you to combine learning with a beach holiday.

**Q.** Rita Gardner:

Any other questions from the audience?

**Q.** Audience:

What about the food and drink?

**A.** Sarah Woods:

Sarah described a strong 'gastronomic scene' that could compete with European cities, with roadside vendors and starred restaurants, but perhaps getting more rustic the further out of the major cities you go. She explained that food tends to be everywhere as Colombians see eating more like a ceremony rather than simply as a fuel. Cartagena has some great restaurants, but even places like La Gaujira has great food, but instead of a restaurant you'll sit on a beach and someone will bring you freshly caught fish. In San Andrés you can eat lobsters from the islands and fish yourself. Overall, Colombia offers sophisticated food and has a mix of influences from Spanish and African cultures.

Matthew Paris:

Matthew stressed that the standard of food hygiene is very high in Colombia.

**Q.** Audience:

What is the best time of the year to travel?

**A.** Sarah Woods:

This will depend very much on what you want to do. She tries to avoid all the domestic holidays when prices are going to inflate accommodation costs and domestic flights are booked out. There are great variations in climatic zones. Bogotá is quite chilly as it is the third highest city in South America. On the Caribbean coast it is in the mid-30s all year. The seasons have been quite difficult to predict recently. A visit with a group which was supposed to be the dry season (October) turned out to be quite wet (but still warm). The rise and fall of water levels on the Amazon has a major impact on where you can access by boat and can affect flying into Leticia. The city of eternal spring, Medellin can be visited year round with little humidity and an average temperature of 23°C.

Most people will say to visit in the (UK) spring or in our autumn and then you stand a reasonable chance for getting the weather that you're looking for unless going to very lowland or very highland areas where you may need to do further research.

Matthew Paris:

Matthew added that Colombia is not one of those countries where one can go and feel there is a cast iron guarantee for good weather. It is a green country where it rains quite a lot; therefore one should expect rain interspersed with sunshine, especially if you want to go high into the Andes and national parks. It can be worth looking at meteorological charts for those particular places.

**Q.** Audience:

What about getting there, is it exuberantly costly?

**A.** Matthew Paris:

Matthew advised not to travel via Miami Airport, the best way is by a direct flight, which there used to be and which BA may do in the future. For the short term, the best way is to fly via a European capital such as Barcelona, Madrid, Frankfurt and the costs should not be prohibitive.

Sarah Woods:

Sarah added that costs can vary a lot and they are still more expensive than they should be. People who are actively promoting Colombia, the tour operators, are pushing quite hard for a direct flight. There are more than double the number of tour operators actively selling Colombia, so there's more weight and more pressure that can be applied and hopefully this will be reflected in flight prices in the future.

**Q.** Rita Gardner:

I got the feeling from what you've been saying that its either travelling with a tour company or independently, both are really possible, is that true?

**A.** Matthew Paris:

Matthew agreed, but recommended that if you went independently it would be no bad thing to go equipped with the names and addresses of a couple of Bolivian guides.

**Q.** Audience:

I had trouble getting between Bogotá and Cartagena as there was a road block, therefore we had to fly, is it now possible to go by road or do you still have to fly?

**A.** Matthew Paris:

Matthew advised that in his experience security isn't generally a problem when travelling between any of the major conurbations in Colombia and if there is a problem, people will tell you. Certainly you can go over land to Cartagena. The problem is that the country is deeply serrated with large mountain ranges and deep valleys and every road just goes up and down up and down and as a result the (good) coach services can take a very long time.

Sarah Woods:

Sarah reported that the bus situation and public transport is much improved. She acknowledges that public transport is still not for everybody. She has herself undertaken a couple of bus journeys, (not Bogotá to Cartagena, as the flights are so frequent and therefore relatively inexpensive). The general situation with travelling on your own is that most people would say there is no problem; one should just avoid doing the night buses (there haven't been any incidences recently but any travel in the dark with luggage around is when some petty theft may occur). Most of the backpackers Sarah talked to were taking the buses during the day or in groups if they were going on the night buses. It is worth remembering that generally speaking this applies all over central and South America, (to travel in the light and in the safest and most direct way possible).

**Q.** Audience:

I want to travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific, I want to visit the Choco department and I'm really keen, but does my wife agree?

**A.** Matthew Paris:

Matthew described part of the journey he had travelled, from Manaus in Brazil, up to Tabatinga and Leticia in Colombia where there are regular fast boat services. Lots of people go that way and you can continue by the boat service he described from Tabatinga to Iquitos in Peru, so that section should be achieved with no difficulty it, and it is comfortable and cheap.

Sarah Woods:

Sarah flew into Bahía Solano airport which is an airport on the Pacific coast in that department and travelled by road and by boat. She has used a variety of boat tour companies and locals to take her along the coastline which she described as stunningly beautiful and the experience of two very different countries with such distinct characters, as breathtaking. She returned to the area when writing her book because the Choco department and pacific coast had become much safer for international tourism halfway through her writing. More and more people are travelling that way and it is certainly worth the effort to get there.

**Q.** Rita Gardner:

So happily safe for women?

**A.** Sarah Woods/ Matthew Paris:

Yes

**Q.** Audience:

Solo female travellers, any problems?

**A.** Sarah Woods:

If you don't mind the odd wolf whistle or odd comment you'll be fine, Colombians are very respectful and women have a very high place in society. They are very well regarded and there are female role models in political and cultural life. Sarah described hotels as being very proactive, without having to prompt them; they would put you in a second floor room. They were always thinking ahead. They made your experiences as a woman more safe and secure.

**Q. Audience:**

Health and Malaria?

**A. Sarah Woods:**

When she took a group in October to Colombia, Sarah described how every single person had received different travel advice. Sarah thought that most GP's would take a pragmatic view about anti-Malaria drugs. As far as she is aware there is nothing specific that the traveller needs to worry about but the best thing to do is to keep looking at the websites for any updates.

Rita Gardner:

Rita reported that her experience of Trailfinders health service had been very positive.

Audience:

There are some places where you can't drink the water so do check. If you're up in the Andes or in Bogotá, it's fairly safe.

Matthew Parris:

Matthew reassured the audience that there is bottled water everywhere.

**Q. Audience:**

Cultural diversity across Colombia?

**A. Sarah Woods:**

Sarah described the great cultural diversity across the country with the exception of Boyacá where you get a mixture of everybody (people moved there when they were displaced by the conflict and so you have a melting pot of different people, like London). She described herself on her first visit as being fascinated by the extensive cultural diversity she witnessed in her travels around the country.

Matthew Paris:

Matthew described Colombians as very city based and immensely proud of their respective cities.

**Q. Audience:**

Have you witnessed any conflicts and if so what was it like.

**A. Sarah Woods:**

Sarah explained that she had not witnessed any conflict whatsoever. Any areas of conflict have been contained into very intense pockets, freeing up the rest of the country so people can travel again. The areas of conflict in the south of the country would be impossible to simply come across as the roads are almost impassable. Sarah described that you would have to be military or very well organised paramilitary to be able to find these areas. They are areas that are so contained and isolated that they really do not affect tourism at all, and she has never seen at any point anything resembling danger or conflict.

Matthew Paris:

Matthew agreed with Sarah's comments. In addition, he thought it worthwhile to point out that there has been a huge improvement in security in Colombia and it is still improving. He tempered this by acknowledging that Colombia is still a country with a major continuing security problem and those parts of the country where the government forces are not in control some people, such as newspaper proprietors, would be worried about kidnapping and would not visit certain areas. In general, the security problem at present does not affect tourists. Tourists have never actually been a focus for the FARC's activities and these are now very much confined.

**Q.** Audience:

How do we find out about the no go areas in terms of conflict or danger and are there no go areas that are actually not really a good use of your time?

**A.** Matthew Paris:

Matthew had never met anyone having had any trouble travelling in Colombia. The places that you can't go to are very isolated and very well known, and there isn't a danger of you wandering off there by mistake.

Sarah Woods:

Sarah described how her experience had been that the foreign office website can be slow to provide up-to-date information. During her original travels, she actually went through the 'red zone' and wrote to inform the foreign office saying that these places are open for tourism and there had not been a problem for years. She believes the foreign office is beginning to catch up with the real situation in Colombia. In addition to the foreign office website, you are not going to find tour operators advertising places that would take tourists into danger nor guide book publishers that encourage you to go to places where you cannot possibly travel safely to. She recommended that if travelling independently one should ask what the situation is on the ground. [Keeping in mind, that everyone has been affected by 40-50 years of conflict so and may well give you a story of what happened 40 years ago for example so you need to put it in some context. They will give you every advice to keep you safe and it is refreshing but it does tend to be the worse case scenario]. There are a lot of police who are very helpful in telling you if there's been a flare up somewhere or a weird situation. In all the times Sarah has visited Colombia, she has never had that situation.

Matthew Paris:

In response to the 'where not to bother with', he had never been anywhere which was not worth going to at all but in his opinion you could do Bogotá in a weekend. He also recommended that if time is limited you could spend a lot of your time on very long and winding journeys taking hours, so the option of an internal flight should not be discounted.

**Q.** Audience:

Cost of living? Challenge the weekend in Bogotá, as there are wonderful galleries and museums? If I use aircraft do I have to shuttle back to Bogotá every time I want to fly – how interconnected is the internal air? Is south Bogotá less safe than the north?

**A.** Sarah Woods:

Sarah agreed with the questioner about south Bogotá. She described the city: with the old colonial core, and the different layers of architecture developing in the time and growth of Bogotá, and how it has expanded beyond anyone's wildest dreams because of the displacement of people due to the

conflict and people settling in shanty towns (the south being the only area that has the space to expand). Bogotá is very much based on social strata. The north is the affluent, middle class area; the south is really the worse in terms of where slums are. As an international tourist, no taxi drivers would take you there; it is not a recognised residential zone, therefore no public services, so Bogotá like any big city has its problems. In regards to cost of living, this varies dramatically from place to place. Cartagena is the most expensive place to be as it's the number one tourist draw. It is where the festival takes place and where a reasonable number of expats have houses and has always been seen as the place to go by Colombians on honeymoons for example. Bogotá is reasonably priced for a capital city. Everywhere else you will be able to eat for about a quarter of what you would usually pay outside of London.

Matthew Paris:

Matthew agreed with Sarah's estimate of what one would normally pay outside of London. He also referred to the questioner's view of Bogotá and that one could conceivably spend longer than a weekend there visiting the galleries and museums.

**Q.** Rita Gardner:

Any hidden gems, very special places?

**A.** Matthew Paris:

A little jungle lodge not far from the main road in a little patch of jungle by the Rio Claro and the other would be the Tierra Dentro.

Sarah Woods:

Definitely go to San Agustín which has incredible carved tombs. It is magical, Colombia's Easter Island, because it has only relatively recently been opened up to tourists. Sarah encouraged the audience to visit now as she fears that mass tourism may impact on the area.

Rita Gardner:

Thank you; you have inspired us all to visit Colombia!