Colombia

Country Facts
Population: 43,677,372
Languages: Spanish. English is widely spoken in the San Andres and Providencia archipelago. Native languages are spoken in many areas of the southeast.
Predominant Religions: Christian (Roman Catholic) and indigenous beliefs
Time Zone: Five hours behind Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 110/120 volts; 150 volts in some regions
Telephone Codes: 57, country code; 1, city code for Bogotá; 2, city code for Cali; 4, city code for Medellín; 5, city code for Cartagena and Barranquilla; 6, city code for Pereira/Armenia/Manizales.

Introduction:
Colombia could be South America’s best-kept secret, if it weren’t for a lingering history of drug trafficking and kidnappings. But it remains a volatile and dangerous country, trapped in a circle of violence. There’s been no final act in the bloody drama being played out by drug lords, terrorists, guerrillas, vigilantes and corrupt politicians. Ordinary citizens — and on rare occasions, travelers — continue to be caught in the crossfire, despite ongoing negotiations between the country’s president and its guerrilla and right-wing paramilitary groups. Yet travelers return from Colombia raving about the beauty and the hospitable, friendly people.

Compassion in Colombia:
Compassion International’s work in Colombia began in 1976. As of 2010 more than 51,160 children participate in more than 194 child development centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 100 students. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Colombian children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- Ensure that you take safety precautions when in Colombia. Ask what areas of the city are dangerous. Be aware that both the murder rate and frequency of kidnapping is significantly high.
- The formality of inland Colombians extends to their manners; they do not like to engage in expansive gestures and animation. Residents of the coastal regions tend to be more expressive and less formal.
- The standard greeting is a handshake upon introduction and departure.
- Among close friends, women may clasp forearms or kiss each other on one cheek. Men embrace and slap each other’s back. This particular hug is known as the “abrazo.”
- Colombians tend to take a long time in greetings, as they feel that doing so demonstrates respect for the other person. After the handshake or hug, Colombians typically ask numerous polite questions and go through other pleasantries. Expect inquiries as to your health, your trip, your family and any friends or acquaintances you have in common. It is considered callous and disrespectful to rush a greeting.
• Titles are very important. When you can’t use a title, address the person with “señor” [sir] or “señora” [ma’am] and the first surname. Mr. Fernando Rodríguez Gonzales would be addressed as “Señor Rodríguez.” “Señorita” is only used for unmarried girls.

• Colombians generally converse in closer proximity than North Americans; do your best to adapt to this, as it may be taken personally if you back away from someone. Nevertheless, Colombians tend to engage in less physical contact while in conversation than other South Americans.

• It is considered polite to maintain close eye contact during conversations.

• Yawning in public is considered impolite. Moreover, always cover your mouth when yawning, sneezing or coughing.

• In crowds and line-ups, pushing is very common. You’ll have to be assertive in order to reach your destination. Do not, however, get involved in pushing matches.

• Colombians like to indicate that someone is stingy by tapping their fingers on their elbow.

• Moving the edge of one’s hand back and forth across the back of the opposite hand indicates a business agreement to share profits.

• Hitting your hand against your elbow may indicate that you’re labeling a person cheap or selfish.

• Instead of pointing or using your index finger, extend your hand, palm down, and use your fingers, motioning toward yourself. Pointing or using the index finger to beckon is frowned upon.

• Avoid finger gestures if you are not sure what they mean in Colombia — some are considered obscene and insulting, such as the U.S. gesture for “OK” [thumb and forefinger form a circle] or two pointing fingers.

• To demonstrate the height of an animal or object, Colombians extend their hand down and hold it at the appropriate level. To indicate a human’s height, they extend the hand palm out and thumb up. To show how long something is, Colombians extend their right arm and mark the proper length with their left hand.

• With the exception of the beach, footwear must be worn at all times and at all venues.

Dos and Don’ts:

• Do keep your bargaining for handicrafts to a minimum — if you persist too long, you just come off as being stingy. [In act, fewer and fewer businesses allow bargaining.]

• Don’t change money on the street. The counterfeiting of all currencies and traveler’s checks is a serious problem in Colombia.

• Don’t dress too noticeably or carry a camera or cell phone, especially in Bogotá. While traveling by car in cities, keep your windows closed. Never allow a motorcycle or motor scooter to ride alongside you.

• Do not show undue attention to an unknown child on the street or in rural villages, no matter how adorable he or she is. Although the sentiment is more pronounced in Central America, in parts of Colombia foreigners who attempt to ingratiate themselves with children are suspected as kidnappers.
Do talk about the good things Colombia has to offer: the gold museum in Bogotá, coffee, literature, music, food and soccer. Do not criticize bullfighting; it’s very popular. Politics, guerrillas and drugs are topics best avoided.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:

The U.S. government’s war against drug traffickers has made U.S. companies, organizations and citizens particular targets for terrorists. U.S. tourists are not usually targets of kidnapping, since they are considered “chicken feed,” and the United States does not negotiate with kidnappers and even freezes bank accounts immediately to avoid the paying of ransoms.

Avoid patterns of routine, which can be observed. Never accept food, beverages or cigarettes from other bus passengers, much less in bars or market stalls: They may be laced with burundanga, an odorless and tasteless poison (similar to the “date rape drug”) that leads to unconsciousness and temporary loss of memory. An overdose can kill you. Sadly the police are a matter of concern, too. Many are corrupt and are not above slipping drugs into your pockets to extort bribes. Always carry identification, such as a photocopy of your passport; not having proper ID is a serious offense.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

Health:

In rural areas especially, sanitary conditions in restaurants may not be very good. Your doctor may recommend hepatitis A and B and tetanus vaccinations. Consult with your personal doctor for their recommendation. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be considered safe, but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly and avoid local dairy products. Tap water in large cities is safe, but in other areas, assume it is unsafe [stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks]. Even bottled drinks can be suspect, depending on the quality of bottle washing and water used at the beverage plant.

Medical and dental facilities in Colombia’s large cities are excellent by South American standards. More and more patients fly in from other countries to receive treatment in Colombia,
especially laser eye surgery, dental treatment and plastic surgery. Many doctors have been trained in the United States and speak English. In the cities, the pharmacies are usually very well-stocked, but even rural areas have drugs for common medical conditions. However, if you’re touring rural areas, you should bring with you any prescription medicine you need.

Cholera is not endemic in Colombia. Few actual cases have been reported recently, so you may no longer need a vaccination. However, malaria, including chloroquine-resistant strains, is widespread in rural and jungle areas, and dengue, another mosquito-borne disease, is also prevalent. Note that at altitudes above 5,000 feet/1,500 meters, carrier mosquitoes — and consequently, malaria — are rare. If your travels take you mainly to such higher elevations as Bogotá, Medellín, Manizales or Pasto, your risk of contracting malaria is likely very low. However, please consult your personal doctor for their recommendation.

The Caribbean coast is considered rather unproblematic, but prophylaxis [health measures that prevent diseases] is needed on the Pacific coast [Choco] in the vicinity of the Putumayo and Guaviare rivers, in some areas of the Magdalena Medio and in Amazonia. These areas are chloroquine-resistant. Consult with your personal doctor about preventive measures. The most dangerous variety of malaria, malaria tropicana, occurs mostly in Choco. In other areas, malaria quartana prevails.

Bring insect repellent and sleep under mosquito nets in affected regions. The malaria-carrying anopheles mosquito is active mostly at dawn and dusk and during the night. A vaccination for yellow fever may not be required, but it is advisable for those traveling along the eastern part of the Caribbean coast (especially in Tayrona National Park) and in low-lying areas close to the border with Venezuela. Brazil [and other Latin American countries] will require a yellow-fever vaccination if you have been in Colombia in the previous six weeks.

Altitude sickness can be a real, sometimes even deadly problem in the Parque de los Nevados. If it persists, you must descend to a lower elevation. The sun can be very strong, so use sunscreen liberally and wear a hat. In the summer months, people in Bogotá often catch a common cold (gripe), because the weather can be cool and wet.

We strongly advise that you contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations.

Money:
Colombia uses the Colombian peso, one of Latin America’s strongest currencies. Dollars are readily exchanged at most banks and casas de cambio but are almost never accepted as direct payment. Too many “drug dollars” and counterfeited dollar bills have flooded the country. Traveler’s checks [American Express preferred] in U.S. dollars are grudgingly accepted in cities only, but the exchange process is complicated and time-consuming. It often takes one hour and will only be cashed in the morning. In rural areas, these are usually refused. The exchange rate
can vary up to 5 percent, but is usually better than that offered for cash. It’s best to take credit cards.

**Weather:**
Colombia has an equatorial climate. As a whole, the country enjoys its best weather December through March, when it rains the least. During the periods of May through July and October through December, heavy rains can fall (though these are usually followed by bright sunshine). The elevation ranges from sea level to 10,000 feet/3,050 meters, so temperatures can vary greatly. Coastal cities and Leticia have day temperatures in the 70s-80s F / 23-32 C, with nights in the 60s-70s F / 17-27 C year-round. A sweater or light jacket is needed along the coast at night and a jacket in the mountains.

**Dress:**
Women should cover their shoulders when entering a church. Men generally should avoid shorts. In Bogotá and inland, wear darker clothes. Nights can be cool, and even cold inland. It may rain, so bring a jacket or a sweater. Many smaller hotels have no heating. On the coast, wear light cotton clothes and a hat.

*All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.*