

# CLOUD ATLAS

Colombia might not be on everybody's bucket list of destinations, but **Carmen Jenner** was happy to be seduced by this country with its head in the clouds.

**IN ONE OF** the most dangerous countries in the world I stand on the side of the road with my thumb out.

There is another woman striking a similar pose except she's poured into the Colombian uniform of jeans tight enough to make out the lace on her g-string and, of course, the obligatory stilettos. This attire applies to women of any age, size or shape and I admire their fierce quest for sexiness as dust settles on my sneakers.

My entourage hangs back in the wings behind our Mazda which now sits defeated on the side of the road with its hood up in shame. Given the curious stares from the drivers negotiating the hairpins turns, my fair skin must be a rarity in these parts of the Andes. And for this reason alone I have been assigned the task of hitching us a lift into Pasto for some very important coffee business.

Finally an overloaded bus screeches to a halt and my cohorts emerge from the dust and we all pile on hoping it gets us into

town, preferably on time.

It's a mad dash made all the more intense by the humidity and the fact I've been in the same clothes for two days since my suitcase decided to check out the sights in Bogota. Thankfully, I had unknowingly planned ahead and was appropriately dressed for the early morning visit to the Gothic-revival style El Santuario de Las Lajas carved into the canyon of the Guaitara River in the town Ipiales.

The sanctuary has been a pilgrimage site for hundreds of years and involves a 262-step trek each way and in my case, with insane jetlag and at an altitude so high I can't get my head around, is quite a challenge. Nonetheless, it was worth getting up before the birds, and even before coffee, which ironically is the main purpose of my trip.

Organised by my generous hosts from Asprounion, an association formed to support the coffee farmers of Narino Department (region) in southern



Colombia, the meeting includes key delegates including an auspicious senator. It's enlightening considering I know not a word of Spanish and my translator works double time asking questions on my behalf. Over a fitting dessert of tiramisú, everyone proudly explains their role in the coffee trade of this lesser known region.

Often overshadowed by the better known Coffee Triangle in central Colombia, the farms in the south produce a far superior grade of coffee compliments of the high altitude (1,400-1,900 metres above

Legend has it a witch who once lived on the mountain would round up all the misbehaving men in town and ply them with hallucinogens to make herself appear beautiful so they would fall in love with her.

**ADVENTURE TIME** Colombia's mountainous landscape is lush and full of surprises - stay on a local farm to experience the country at its most authentic.

sea level), volcanic soil, closer proximity to the equator and 500 less sunlight hours per year. The richness of flavour in this region is also attributed to the placement of coffee trees between fruit and vegetable plantings also serving to rejuvenate the soil.

Visitors to the region with an interest in the coffee industry, food security, and conservation farming can immerse themselves in rural life in this special pocket of Colombia with a farm stay; where I can almost guarantee any previous misconceptions about the country will dissolve.

I'm welcomed into the Chicazia family at Campo Bello, meaning beautiful land. Nestled in El Sauce with the Andes framing vistas every which way, the villagers joining

## Fast facts - getting to Colombia

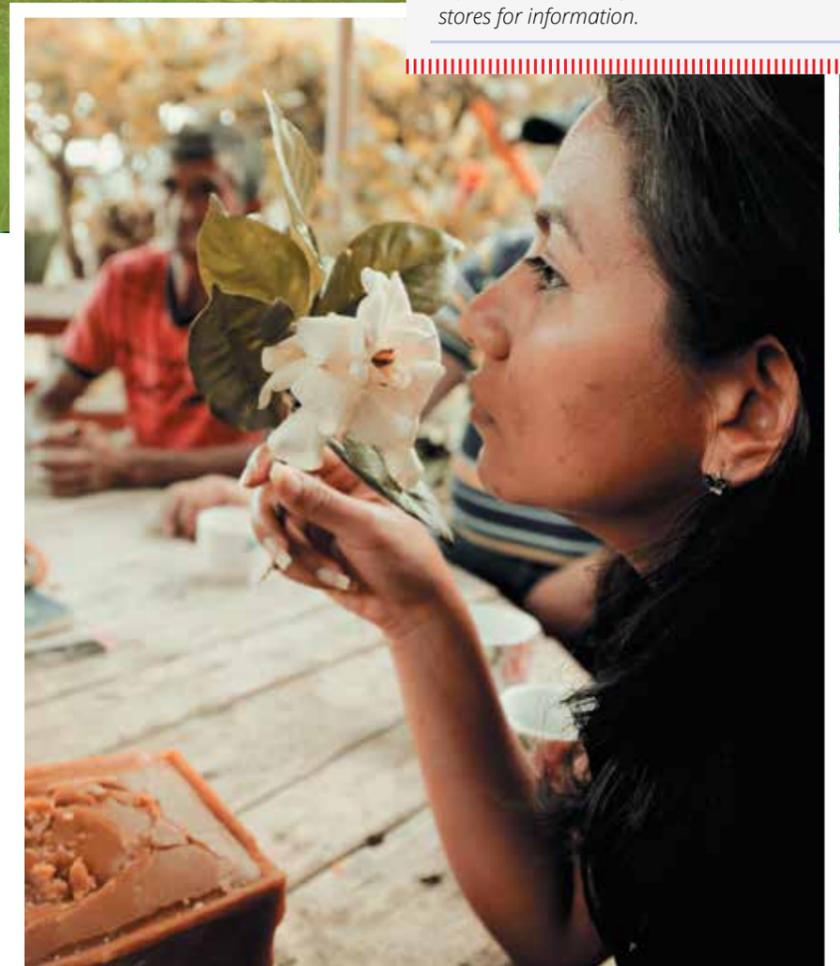


**Transport:** Avianca Airlines flies into Narino's capital Pasto, Aeropuerto Antonio Narino from Bogota and Cali - visit [avianca.com](http://avianca.com)

Pasto to La Union by road takes approximately two and a half hours.

**Stay:** Pasto: Hotel San Fernando Plaza (visit [hotelfernandoplaza.com](http://hotelfernandoplaza.com)); La Union: Hotel Casa Blanca, Road 1/18-49 (room 10 has to-die-for views); Contact Asprounion for more details and farm stay packages at Campo Bello and La Esperanza.

*Carmen Jenner was a guest of Asprounion. Go to [lajacoba.com.au/stores](http://lajacoba.com.au/stores) for information.*





in the festivities of empanadas, the largest chicken I've ever seen, hand-made corn bread (arepa), a passion-fruit drink and of course their prized coffee, sweetened with panela carved off the block of solidified sugar cane.

They share songs, jokes and folklores about the nearby La Jacoba Mountain hovering over the town La Union.

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I eye my glass suspiciously as it's refilled with whiskey until everyone suddenly appears wearing handmade masks no doubt resembling characters of notoriety; I could have sworn Pavarotti was doing the salsa.

Interestingly, the café culture hasn't really taken off in this part of the world with many opting to drink agua de panela, the local sugar cane drink and highly recommended for an energy boost. Named after the infamous mountain, caffeine addicts can head to La Jacoba Café at Asprounion headquarters a few minutes' drive from La Union.

Behind-the-scenes tours and tourist information is available on request and as logistics co-ordinator Margareth Liceth Solarte Ojeda says, "My experience here has changed my perception of coffee and people. If we find a way to continue promoting our culture tourists will fall in love with us."

Back in La Union, no doubt many a

**COFFEE CLUB** Colombia produces some of the most delicious coffee beans in the world.

mere male has become besotted as one Miss Colombia after another saunters by seemingly unscathed by her heels; as if being in the Andes isn't high enough. By now my luggage has sheepishly returned, including my own heels and Margareth and I attempt to join the parade through the vibrant and undulating streets.

Initially, we're distracted by the colourful building facades adorned in graffiti and the way the light plays on the clouds embracing the Andes. We sample pata, the jelly of cow shin boiled until it melts, and as unappetising as it sounds, it's tasty and full of wrinkle-defying collagen. It's like a dense and heavily sweetened yoghurt. We're invited into an artist's studio with majestic views inspiring all kinds of clichéd attempts of description.

We linger until the pain becomes exquisite; our heads may be in heaven but our feet are in hell. Determined not to become a tragic sight of heels in hand, we hobble instead into Café Oceano Azul, the best restaurant in town for a feast of grilled meats with plantains, potatoes, carrots and corn. The fog rolls in veiling La Union from the world beyond.

Coffee and beauty aside, what really sets Narino apart is its unique geographical position. It's hugged on all sides by the Andes, the Amazon and the Pacific Ocean



resulting in diverse micro-climates and sub-cultures. The Carnaval de Negros y Blancos (Carnival of Blacks and Whites), held in Pasto in the first week of January, celebrates the fusion of Spanish and African influences corresponding to the Andes, Amazon and Pacific cultures.

The diversity is evident from the range of cuisines, including grilled guinea pig (cuy) and handicrafts available from roadside stalls, often precariously perched on the mountain's edge, and local homes where you're bound to be welcomed into with an inviting smile.

The intrepid may feel the need to conquer those peaks, canyons and rivers but given the steep incline this is for the hard-core willing to rough it in harsh conditions. I'm happy to admire from a distance and continue my quest of reaching for the clouds. **PL**



## PERTH'S COLOMBIAN COFFEE CONNECTION

**YOU'RE NEVER FAR** away from a cup of coffee in Perth. With a staggering quota of cafes per capita, many of us treat "catching up for coffee" as little more than a social occasion. I've always taken it for granted I'll be served an impressive crema precariously floating above a fragrant and flavoursome brew. That was until visiting Colombia.

I gave little thought to the beans' journey, or about the communities who dedicated their lives to growing coffee; like those in the La Union region in the Narino Department in southern Colombia. Until the formation of Asprounion, an association formed to support the coffee farmers of Narino, the farmers themselves had little say in where their beans would be sold and how much profit they could command, if any at all. Out of this collaboration, the La Jacoba coffee brand evolved and was introduced into Perth in 2010 by Asprounion Business Developer Mauricio Velasquez along with an infectious passion for coffee.

"By drinking La Jacoba Coffee you

are directly supporting 273 families and Asprounion associates," said Mauricio at the launch. "That's about 1,000 people's lives you're improving and it means we can really start making a change."

From coffee plantation to cup, the process is as complex as the distance is vast. The favourable conditions of growing beans in the Andes at a high altitude produces a flavour so unique and complex that only the most highly skilled of quality graders can recognise all 36 characteristic aromas. Five years down the track since La Jacoba's launch, many of Perth's key coffee roasters eagerly await their deliveries of green beans every few months. Karin Decima from Atlas Coffee Roasters has been astute enough to recognise the potential of offering their customers a specialty coffee.

"Competition in cafes is always high and a higher quality product will distinguish you from the rest and increase your customer base."

Coming into contact with a superior single origin bean gives even the most

seasoned of roasters and baristas the twitches. Much like a mad scientist concocting magic potions, Perth's most talented coffee experts are blending beans as we speak. That's when they're not sniffing, sipping, swilling and spitting black gold with gusto with their peers at private grading events all over town; like Sprolo Café has at its onsite Blacklist Coffee Roasters in South Perth.

Coffee snobbery? Not at all, it's about honouring the bean while cultivating a superior product for the customer. Just as Christina Hazelwood set out to do when she opened Willie Wagtail in the city, "We wanted to create a place where people could fall in love with coffee. We wanted to give them a chance to go on adventures; trying amazing beans from all across the world, brewed with great care and skill by baristas who love what they do."

Get your Colombian fix at Antz Inya Pantz, Dimattina Coffee, Pound Coffee Roasters, Blacklist Coffee Roasters, Aroma Café, Atlas Coffee Roasters, Ravens Coffee, Humblebee Coffee Roasters, Aroma Café and Oxfam. •

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