

SOUTH AMERICA: THE TOP END – 3 Nov 2017

OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 3 November 2017 – 5 December 2017

Tour Duration: 33 days

Tour Cost (\$AUD): \$19,790

Single Supplement (\$AUD): \$3,560

'The Top End' is Travel Directors most daring traverse into South America. Little visited, this journey offers utterly pristine jungles, abundance of wildlife, the world's highest waterfall and the rich culture of Colombia, a country that has emerged into a new and exciting era, and is waiting to be discovered. This tour, which is a scenic wonderland, will have great appeal for the wildlife enthusiast, but at the same time enriching our travelers with a tapestry of cultural wealth.

French Guyana is the starting point of the tour and in its capital city, Cayenne we experience France and the Caribbean meeting exotic South America. Here we visit France's Ariane Space Centre, an incongruous hi-tech satellite complex surrounded by jungle. We then cross into the Dutch colony of Suriname where we explore remote villages that still cling to their African roots. We then reach Guyana, a country which arguably possesses the most pristine rainforest in the world and the greatest abundance of wildlife in South America. Travelling onto Caracas, we learn of the extraordinary hero, Simon Bolivar before heading south to one of the dazzling jewels on Earth – Angel Falls. From Venezuela we travel to Colombia, a country that has emerged from a violent past into one of the most staggering destinations in Latin America. Here we discover the previously impenetrable colonial wonders of Salento, Medellin and Cartagena. From French Guyana to Colombia, 'The Top End' is a stunning adventure across South America's north face.

Tour Fitness Level: Active

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TOUR ITINERARY

03/11/2017 Australia – Singapore

Fly from your preferred capital city to Singapore.

04/11/2017 Singapore – Paris (D)

Depart Singapore Singapore Airlines SQ 336, 00.10

Arrive Paris Charles de Gaulle 07.10

On arrival in Paris we transfer to our hotel.

Hotel Ibis Paris Orly Airport

Paris

05/11/2017 Paris – Cayenne (French Guiana) (BD)

After breakfast we transfer to the airport for our flight to French Guiana.

Depart Paris Orly Air France AF 852, 11.10

Arrive Cayenne 16.15

On arrival in Cayenne we transfer to our hotel.

Hotel Ker Alberte

Cayenne

06/11/2017 Cayenne – Kourou (BLD)

Cayenne is an eclectic mix of cultures as South America and Europe meet the Caribbean. The city's narrow streets are lined with colonial wrought-iron balconies with louvered shutters painted in tropical pinks, yellows and turquoise. The marketplace is the melting pot of the city as Brazilians, Chinese and French sell their exotic wares. Following our city tour we leave Cayenne and drive to Kourou visiting the Ariane Space Centre en route. In 1964, the French decided to look for an alternative spaceport from their existing one in the Sahara. After studies conducted in all French Colonies, they settled on their jungle clad colony of French Guiana and the town of Kourou, which is just 500km north of the equator. This proximity to the equator makes it ideally placed for launches into geostationary transfer orbit as few changes have to be made to a satellite's trajectory. Launchers also profit from the 'slingshot' effect, which is the energy created by the speed of the earth's rotation around the axis of the poles. This increases the speed of a launcher by 460m per second. These important factors save fuel and money and prolong the active life of satellites. Safety is also important and French Guiana is sparsely populated with 90% of the country covered by equatorial forests. Following the tour we transfer to our hotel.

Hotel Les Roches

Kourou

07/11/2017 Kourou (BLD)

Today we enjoy a tour of Iles du Salut, known as the Salvation Islands, located off the coast of French Guiana 14 kilometres north of Kourou. These islands were part of a notorious penal colony from 1852 to 1947 for the worst criminals of France. We visit Ile Royale, Ile St Joseph, with its eerie solitary-confinement cells, and finally the notorious Ile du Diable – Devil's Island – the infamous 'green hell', once feared as the worst place on earth. Two thousand prisoners endured a living death dubbed the 'Dry Guillotine'. Escape was almost impossible because of the penitentiary's two mighty guardians – the sea and the jungle. Today the tangled roots of trees and dense foliage have softened the complex, yet the imposing features still remain. Indeed this is the very place that inspired Henri Charriere's acclaimed classic, 'Papillion'.

08/11/2017 Kourou – Paramaribo (Suriname) (BLD)

This morning we drive to St Laurent Du Maroni, the border town between French Guiana and Suriname. Before crossing we visit the infamous ‘Camp De La Transportation’, once the largest prison in French Guiana. Here, boat loads of convicts arrived after a three week crossing of the Atlantic. In one of the cells, which once held Henri Charrière, his nickname – ‘Papillon’ – is inscribed on the wall. After our tour we cross the border into Suriname and continue on to its capital, Paramaribo.

Royal Torarica Hotel
Paramaribo

09/11/2017 Paramaribo (BLD)

In 1613 two Dutchmen built a small trade company near the Indian village of Paramaribo. This settlement at the west bank of the Suriname River and 23km from the Atlantic Ocean, was the basis for the current Paramaribo. Today we commence a walking tour of the city starting at the main square and the presidential palace. We continue to the Garden of Palms and the old fort Zeelandia. We then head to the waterfront and the city markets with their heavy African and Indian influences.

10/11/2017 Paramaribo – Lobi Lafu – Paramaribo (BLD)

Today we head out to the village of Lobi Lafu, located on the Upper Suriname River in the Suriname Rainforest. The name translates to ‘love and laugh’. We visit one of the authentic Maroon villages as we learn about their traditional way of life.

11/11/2017 Paramaribo – Georgetown (Guyana) (BLD)

This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Georgetown, Guyana.

Depart Paramaribo Surinam Air PY 421, 10.15

Arrive Georgetown 10.00

The location of Georgetown on the mouth of the Demerara River and ocean, provided an ideal port for a European base on the Atlantic Ocean. Originally known as Stabroek, Georgetown and Guyana were rich in timber, bauxite, gold and diamonds. In addition, the land was supported by vast sugar cane plantations and as a result, the Spanish, Dutch, French and English all fought to possess it. Today Georgetown has an almost fairy tale appearance, with canals, tree-lined avenues and quaint Dutch colonial and Victorian architecture, stemming from its days as Dutch and English colonies. On our arrival we embark on a city tour.

Cara Lodge
Georgetown

12/11/2017 Georgetown – Kaieteur Falls – Iwokrama (BLD)

This morning we board our charter flight for the one-hour flight to Kaieteur Falls. On arrival we take a walk through the rainforest, strolling through a paradise of pristine and untouched jungle to reach the falls. This natural wonder, which is five times the height of Niagara Falls, sends more than 136,000 litres of water per second crashing 251 metres to the bottom of the rocky gorge. Following a tour of the falls, we re-board our charter plane for the short flight to Iwokrama, which is located three hours from the remote Guyana/Brazil border. In the grounds of the Iwokrama Lodge, capybara and agouti roam around and red and green macaws fly overhead. Here we may also see South America's distinctive orange bird, the cock-of-the rock.

Iwokrama River Lodge
Iwokrama

13/11/2017 Iwokrama – Turtle Mountain – Iwokrama (BLD)

After breakfast we take a boat to the foot of Turtle Mountain. Climbing 290 metres to the summit we see breathtaking views of the rainforest canopy, hazy mountain ranges, dense emerald

jungle and the mighty Essequibo River. On our way to the top of the mountain, we may see different species of monkey including the red howler and the wedge-capped capuchin.

14/11/2017 Iwokrama – Georgetown (BLD)

After an early breakfast we leave Iwokrama and travel by road back to Georgetown. This journey takes us through rainforest and remote villages, travelling through parts of the country which are rarely seen by Western tourists. Continuing on we arrive back in Georgetown in time for lunch before checking in to our hotel.

Cara Lodge

Georgetown

15/11/2017 Georgetown – Sloth Island – Georgetown (BLD)

Today we transfer to Parika where we board our boat for the transfer across the Essequibo River to Sloth Island. Apart from sloths, the island is noted for its birdlife. It is home to more than 188 species of birds, including parakeets, tiger heron, green ibis, swallow tailed kite, red and green macaw, red fan parrot, white-necked jacobin, and a variety of honeycreepers. After our visit here we return to Georgetown.

16/11/2017 Georgetown – Port of Spain (Trinidad and Tobago) (BLD)

This morning we return to Georgetown airport for our onward flight to the beautiful Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago.

Depart Georgetown Caribbean Airlines BW 527, 08.15

Arrive Port of Spain 09.25

Trinidad and Tobago were discovered in 1498 by Christopher Columbus, who claimed the islands for Spain. Three hundred years later, in 1798, the British seized the territory and immediately abolished slavery. To make up for the resulting labour shortage, the British encouraged immigration from Portugal, France, Germany, China and India, and in the early 1900s, the country invited thousands of black immigrants from the Caribbean, Venezuela and Colombia. Today Trinidad is the most developed nation in the Caribbean and the island is a cultural melting pot renowned for its pulsating beat of steel drums and calypso music.

Radisson Hotel

Port of Spain

17/11/2017 Port of Spain (BLD)

Today we make a full tour of the capital and explore the myriad of influences as we stroll through the botanical gardens, Independence Square and the Brian Lara Promenade. Driving east, we see houses surrounded by fragments of colored cloth fluttering on long bamboo poles. These Hindu prayer flags are put up for major occasions like births, graduations and weddings. At times it is possible to forget that we are on a Caribbean island, as we see people harvesting sugar cane with machetes and water buffalo slowly ploughing their way through teak forests and rice paddies – more reminiscent of India.

18/11/2017 Port of Spain – Tobago – Port of Spain (BLD)

Tobago is the beautiful little sister island of Trinidad, located only 30km from Venezuela and 250km to the south of Barbados. It is renowned for its white sand beaches, idyllic bays, crystal clear waters, unspoiled coral reefs, unique undersea world, waving palms and tropical rainforest. We spend the day exploring the 41km wide island as we delve into small villages framed by mountains, cocoa plantations and forests before returning to Trinidad in the late afternoon.

19/11/2017 Port of Spain – Puerto Ordaz – Canaima (Venezuela) (BLD)

This morning we return to the airport for our charter flight to Venezuela. On arrival in Puerto Ordaz we clear customs and continue onto Canaima. Here we board a boat to the beautiful

Canaima Lagoon, and, skirting the jungle we see the world's most ancient rock formations, the 'tepuy's'.

Waku Lodge

Canaima

20/11/2017 Canaima – Angel Falls – Canaima (BLD)

Before the mid-1950s Angel Falls was unknown to the outside world. Even the indigenous tribes who lived in the valley beside Auyán-tepu Mountain stayed away, believing that the area harboured malign spirits. However, in 1933 an American gold prospector, Jimmie Angel, discovered the falls as he flew over the mountain in his light plane. Returning in 1937, he landed his plane successfully on Auyán-tepu's table-topped summit, although the plane's wheels became submerged in mud, and the aircraft remained marooned on top of the mountain until 1970. When the aviator died in 1962, his ashes were scattered across the top of the falls. Today we take a boat upriver before we start our hike to Angel Falls, the world's highest uninterrupted waterfall. Located in Canaima National Park, the waterfall tumbles from a cleft near the summit of Auyán-tepu into what is known as Devil's Canyon, 979 metres below. The falls are a tributary of the Carrao River, which is part of Venezuela's Orinoco River system. Angel Falls is regarded as a dazzling highlight in world travel.

21/11/2017 Canaima – Puerto Ordaz – Caracas (BLD)

Today we transfer to the airport for our charter flight back to Puerto Ordaz and Caracas.

Renaissance Hotel

Caracas

22/11/2017 Caracas (BLD)

The historical centre of Caracas is Plaza Bolivar. The square was originally called Plaza de Armas but was renamed on the 100th birthday of Simon Bolivar in 1883. The plaza is surrounded by buildings of huge historic relevance: Caracas Cathedral, Miraflores Palace, the City Hall, the Yellow House and the Capitol (Congress of Venezuela). Simón Bolívar's birthplace is near here in a colonial house, now enriched by the paintings of Tito Salas, who captured important moments in Bolivar's amazing life. Later we visit El Capitolio, where the golden keys to Simon Bolivar's mausoleum are kept. We then take a cable car to the top of the Ávila Mountain Range from where we have breathtaking views of Caracas and the Caribbean Sea. Mid-afternoon we transfer to the airport for our flight to Bogota.

Depart Caracas Copa Airlines CM 225, 18.06

Arrive Panama City 19.36

Depart Panama City Copa Airlines CM 415, 21.14

Arrive Bogota 22.55

After clearing customs and immigration we transfer to our hotel.

Hotel Holiday Inn Express

Bogota

23/11/2017 Caracas – Bogota (Colombia) (BD)

Bogotá is the beating heart of Colombia and the most significant city in the 'Top End'. This afternoon we visit the icon of Bogota, Cerro de Monserrate, a mountain of 3,160m, which we ascend by cable car. The view from the top to the city and beyond to the Andes is simply astonishing.

24/11/2017 Bogota (BLD)

Today we visit the city's cultural epicentre, La Candelaria. We start with a visit to the world-famous 'gold museum' before strolling around the cobbled historic downtown of old Bogota. Neat rows of houses, in a colour palette of pinks, ochres, yellows, reds and greens, line the side streets of the neighbourhood. Cartoon eyes stare down from wooden shutters and wrought-iron

balconies, as smoke puffs from chimneys protruding from orange-tile rooftops. La Candelaria is a cauldron of preciously preserved colonial buildings comprising 300-year-old homes, churches and convents. This afternoon we visit the number one wonder of Colombia, the Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá, an amazing underground Roman Catholic Church as well as the most famous Colombian architectural achievement.

25/11/2017 Bogota – Armenia – Salento (BLD)

Depart Bogota, Avianca AV 9837, 09.12

Arrive Armenia 10.15

On our arrival into Armenia, we transfer to the nearby town of Salento. Set amid verdant green mountains, this small town is the centre of coffee production and trout farming. Founded in 1850, Salento is one of the oldest towns in Quindío Department. It is a sensation of colour and adorned with typical paisa architecture. Today we head out to a coffee plantation and see the fascinating production process from beginning to end. We enjoy lunch in the charming Reserve el Cairo, a 100-year-old coffee house which is surrounded by amazing landscapes.

Hotel Salento Real

Salento

26/11/2017 Salento (BLD)

Colombia is blessed with beautiful landscapes, and Valle de Cocora is one of its most striking. Here, in a broad green valley, flanked by jagged peaks, stand the palma de cera (wax palm), the largest palm in the world that grows up to 60 metres tall. This morning we walk through the valley starting in misty green hills before entering into dense cloud forest where hummingbirds feed voraciously. In the afternoon we explore the town of Salento.

27/11/2017 Salento – Medellin (BLD)

Today we begin our spectacular drive to Medellín, zigzagging between the Cordillera Occidental and the Cordillera Central. We pass through precipitous agricultural terracing of coffee and banana plantations. Entering a large gorge we cross the Rio Cauca and continue through to Medellín, arriving in the late afternoon.

Hotel Poblado Plaza

Medellin

28/11/2017 Medellin (BLD)

Medellin was once dubbed 'The Most Dangerous City in the World' by Time Magazine. In the last 20 years, however, it has completely reinvented itself at a speed that no other city in the world has matched. Situated in a narrow valley, the city's skyline – which is reminiscent of La Paz – reaches to the top of the surrounding peaks. Today we set out to explore 'the City of Eternal Spring', visiting the historic quarter, the beautiful parks and plazas, and amazing urban development projects, including Colombia's cable car system, built to service poorer neighborhoods located high on the mountainsides. In the afternoon we learn about Colombia's notorious drug lord and 'Robin Hood', Pablo Escobar, a man both loved and feared by millions of people. We see where his extensive cocaine operation took place and the house where Escobar was shot and killed in 1993. Our tour today also takes us to the Museo de Antioquia for an exhibition of the famous Colombian artist, Fernando Botero.

29/11/2017 Medellin – Guatapé – Medellin (BLD)

Today we drive outside Medellín to Guatapé, an eclectic town surrounded by green hills and fresh water lakes. One of Colombia's most picturesque towns, Guatapé is famous for the beautiful pastel-colored paintings found on the lower half of nearly every building in the historic centre. We explore this delightful town on foot, strolling through its cobblestone streets and local markets. We then head over to El Peñon rock, an enormous monolithic formation that stands majestically 2,100 metres above sea level.

30/11/2017 Medellin – Cartagena (BLD)
Depart Medellin Avianca AV 9386, 09.40
Arrive Cartagena 10.50

In many ways Cartagena is the jewel in the crown of the Caribbean and one of the most compelling 'pueblos' in South America. Founded in 1533, the vast riches plundered by Spanish colonists turned Cartagena into the most breathtaking city in the New World. Today this fairy-tale city is the epitome of superbly preserved beauty lying within an impressive 13km-long, centuries-old, colonial stone wall. Indeed, Cartagena's old town is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Sofitel Hotel
Cartagena

01/12/2017 Cartagena (BLD)

This morning we continue to explore the city as we head to the Castle of San Felipe de Barajas, a building outside the walled city formerly used for colonists' military purposes when Cartagena was the largest garrison in colonial South America. It was built in 1536 and modified in the year 1657, at which time it was called Castillo de San Lazaro. Our tour continues on to the 'Museo Historico de Cartagena de Indias' located in the former Museo de la Inquisition. The afternoon is at leisure.

02/12/2017 Cartagena – Bogota – Paris (B)

Early this morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Bogota.

Depart Cartagena Avianca AV 9547, 15.42

Arrive Bogota 17.12

Depart Bogota Air France AF 429, 20.50

03/12/2017 Arrive Paris

Arrive Paris Charles de Gaulle 13.45

On arrival in Paris we transfer to our hotel.

Ibis Paris CDG Airport Hotel

Paris

04/12/2017 Paris – Singapore

Depart Paris Charles de Gaulle Singapore Airlines SQ 335, 11.00

05/12/2017 Singapore – Australia

Arrive Singapore 06.40

On arrival in Singapore connect with the flight to your chosen Australian capital city.