

SOUTH AMERICA: THE TOP END

OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 3 November 2017 – 2 December 2017

Tour Duration: 30 days

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

Single Supplement (\$AUD): \$3,395

'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

SOUTH AMERICA: THE TOP END

TOUR ITINERARY

03/11/2017 Australia –Paris

Fly from your preferred capital city to Paris, connecting with our flight to South America.
Depart Singapore Air France AF 257, 23.15

04/11/2017 Paris (LD)

Arrive Paris 06.10

On arrival in Paris we transfer to our hotel near Orly airport.

Hotel Ibis

Orly

05/11/2017 Paris – Cayenne (BD)

Depart Paris Air France AF 852, 10.45

Arrive Cayenne 16.00

On arrival in Cayenne we transfer to our hotel.

Hotel Ker Alberte

Cayenne

06/11/2017 Cayenne (BLD)

Cayenne is an amazing mix as South America and Europe meet the Caribbean and where a riot of cultures merge, bathed in the colours of 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.

07/11/2017 Cayenne – Kourou (BLD)

This morning we leave Cayenne and drive to Kourou. Here we board our boat to Devil's Island, the infamous 'green hell', once feared as the worst place on earth. A prison from 1852 until 1946, the island was synonymous with cruelty. 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 Papillon.

Hotel Atlantis Kourou

Kourou

08/11/2017 Kourou – Ariane Space Centre – Paramaribo (BLD)

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.

Today we visit the site and after our tour we cross the border into Suriname and continue on to its capital, Paramaribo.

Courtyard 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 – Santigron – Paramaribo (BLD)

Today we head out to the village of Santigron, which was founded around 1900 by the Saramaccans – descendants of runaway slaves. The village is located on the Saramacca River and has 500 inhabitants. The people live in much the same way as they did 200 years ago, with agriculture, hunting, fishing, handicrafts and carvings as their main source of income. Despite the influence and proximity to the city, a large proportion of the inhabitants of Santigron continue their rich traditions from Africa. The residents in the village have a wonderful and insightful knowledge of medicinal herbs from the jungle.

11/11/2017 Paramaribo – Georgetown (BLD)

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.

Herdmanston Lodge
Georgetown

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

This morning we board our charter flight for the one-hour flight to Kaieteur Falls. On arrival we take a walk through Iwokrama Forest., 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. 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 Kaieteur Falls – Turtle Mountain – Kaieteur Falls

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 Capuchin.

14/11/2017 Kaieteur Falls – Sloth Island – Georgetown (BLD)

Early this morning we take our charter flight back to Bartica from where we 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.

Herdmanston Lodge
Georgetown

15/11/2017 Georgetown – Port of Spain (Trinidad) (BLD)

Depart Georgetown Caribbean Airlines BW 600, 10.20

Arrive Port of Spain 11.30

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 labor 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. 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

Courtyard Port of Spain (BLD)

Port of Spain

16/11/2017 Port of Spain (BLD)

Today we drive around the island of Trinidad to gain a better appreciation of this cultural mix. 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.

17/11/2017 Port of Spain – Caracas (BLD)

Depart Port of Spain Caribbean Airlines BW 300, 07.45

Arrive Caracas 08.40

On our arrival in Caracas we drive straight to the historical centre at 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, the government 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 canvassed important moments in Bolivar's amazing life. Later we visit the Capitolio, Palacio Legislativo 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

Gran Melia Hotel
Caracas

18/11/2017 Caracas – Canaima (BLD)

This morning we leave Caracas for our flight to Puerto Ordaz and 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 'tepuys'.

Campamento Canaima Lodge

Canaima

19/11/2017 Canaima – Angel Falls – Canaima (BLD)

Before the mid-1950s Angel Falls were 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 falls. Today we take a boat up river 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 are regarded as a dazzling highlight in world travel.

20/11/2017 Canaima – Caracas (BD)

Today we transfer to the airport for our flight to Caracas via Puerto Ordaz

Gran Melia Hotel

Caracas

21/11/2017 Caracas – Bogota (BD)

Depart Caracas Avianca AV 69, 11.22

Arrive Bogota 13.02

Bogotá is the vibrant heartbeat 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.

Hotel de la Opera

Bogota

22/11/2017 Bogota (BLD)

Today we emerge from our hotel into the city's cultural epicenter, La Candelaria, 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.

23/11/2017 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 Quindio. 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.

Hotel Salento Real Salento

24/11/2017 Salento (BLD)

Colombia is blessed with beautiful landscapes, yet Valle de Cocora is one of the most awe-inspiring in the world. 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.

25/11/2017 Salento – Medellin (BLD)

Today we begin our spectacular drive to Medellin, 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 Medellin, arriving in the late afternoon.

Hotel Plaza Caracas Medellin

26/11/2017 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 in 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.

27/11/2017 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 the picturesque 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.

28/11/2017 Medellin – Cartagena (BLD)

Depart Medellin Avianca AV 9386, 09.42

Arrive Cartagena 10.49

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 fairytale 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.

Sofia Hotel Cartagena

29/11/2017 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 America. It was built in 1536 and modified in the year 1657, at which time it was called Castillo de San Lazaro. The afternoon is at leisure.

30/11/2017 Cartagena – Bogota – Paris (B)

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

Depart Cartagena Avianca 9759, 12.27

Arrive Bogota 13.57

Depart Bogota AF 423, 17.30

01/12/2017 Paris – Singapore

Arrive Paris 11.15

On arrival we will transfer to our hotel for the day before returning to the airport for our evening flight home.

Ibis Paris Airport Hotel

Depart Paris Air France AF 256, 21.00

02/12/2017 Singapore – Australia

Arrive Singapore 16.30

On arrival in Singapore connect to your chosen Australian city

SOUTH AMERICA: THE TOP END

Why is the Tour Fitness Level rated as 'Active'?

This tour involves a reasonable amount of walking, climbing steps and stairs, and exploring sites with uneven ground. A number of the towns we visit are best explored on foot and many have narrow streets and uneven surfaces. In addition there is some exploration on foot of nature reserves and parklands. Overall, a reasonable degree of fitness is required to get the most from the tour.

How long is the flight from Australia to Paris?

The flying time to Singapore is between 5 ½ hours and 8 ½ hours, depending on your Australian capital city of departure. Flight time from Singapore to Paris is approx. 13 ½ hours.

Can I stop in Singapore or Paris in either direction to break up the total flight time?

Yes. We find many of our guests choose this option. Just let our consultants know if you want to take up this option and we will make the booking on your behalf.

Is personal security a problem in this part of South America?

In most of South America security is not a big problem. However we remind our guests of the need to take sensible precautions. These include not wearing ostentatious jewellery, not showing or counting money in public, and not going to certain areas at night. Basically it's a case of using common sense, particularly in large cities.

What is the best currency to take on this journey?

The best currency is US Dollars, in small denominations. ie 50s, 20s and 10s.

How much spending money do I need for the entire trip?

Because almost everything is included, we would suggest an amount of USD \$1000 per person as being ample for the whole 30-day journey. However, if you're a keen shopper and like to buy lots of gifts and souvenirs, you may require more.

Are credit cards acceptable?

Credit cards are generally acceptable for purchases throughout the tour. ATMs are available in most of South America for cash withdrawals. However we don't recommend relying solely on these as the main source of funds – we suggest taking some cash in USD.

Do I need vaccinations for this journey?

IMPORTANT: A yellow fever vaccination is mandatory on this tour and the certificate for the injection must accompany each passenger, as, on arrival back in Australia, immigration may ask to see it. In the rare case where a person cannot be given the vaccine, a certificate of waiver must be obtained. Tetanus should always be up to date. As we travel into malarial areas, a powerful insect repellent is essential and anti-malaria tablets are recommended. We suggest that you also seek advice from your doctor.

Is the water safe to drink en-route and what is the general standard of hygiene?

We err on the side of caution on all of our tours and advise travellers to drink only bottled water. This is easy to obtain everywhere. The standard of hygiene in South America is surprisingly high along the entire route. We recommend the use of hand sanitiser before each meal and occasionally during the day as we will be handling local money and visiting public places.

Is it possible to join the tour at a particular section, rather than doing the whole trip?

There is no restriction and you can join the tour at any point. Check with our consultants for flight availability and cost variations.

Do I need visas for South America?

An Australian passport holder will need a visa for Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago. These are included in the tour cost and we take care of the paperwork associated with this.

A lot of companies have many expensive optional extras on their tours. Do you?

We don't believe in a lot of expensive 'optional tours'. Our itineraries are designed to make the best possible use of time and to include all the must-see sights, plus additional surprises. Therefore practically everything is included in the tour cost.

What is the standard of hotels like on this tour?

We endeavour to use centrally located hotels throughout. The hotels on this trip are of a high standard and generally between 4 and 5 star.

Are internet facilities available en-route?

All of the hotels we use have internet facilities. In addition there are many internet cafes located near to the hotels.

Do mobile telephones work?

Telstra and Optus mobiles work throughout the entire journey except in the Amazon. You will need to ensure you have global roaming and a tri-band phone. Contact your service provider for further details.

How much should we tip the guides and porters?

There is no need to tip guides or porters as all tipping and gratuities are included in the tour cost.