

Come to sunny Colombia

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Seriously, it's almost safe



MENTION Colombia, and most people think of cocaine, kidnappings and guerrilla violence. These have served to keep all but the most danger-loving tourists away for decades. But under Álvaro Uribe, Colombia's president since 2002, violence has fallen steadily and many parts of the country have become safe. Now the government is trying to replace conventional images of Colombia with different ones: white-sand beaches, colonial cities, jungle-clad mountains and placid coffee farms.

The tourism campaign has begun at home. This month, during the mid-year school holidays, thousands of Colombians have enjoyed the newly-recovered freedom to travel, using specially policed routes from major cities to favourite holiday spots. The aim now is to convince foreigners. With a promotional budget of just \$4m this year, the tourism agency is concentrating its efforts on tour operators and cruise and airline executives. This spring, it invited 130 of them to see the country's beaches, its coffee farms and the Amazon region.

Mr Uribe has himself lobbied bosses of cruise-ship firms. This seems to have paid off. In May, Royal Caribbean announced that from next year some of its ships would call at Cartagena, a colonial walled port on the north coast. The Florida Caribbean Cruise Association held its annual meeting in the city last week.

Tourism officials expect 1.5m foreign visitors this year, more than 50% up from the 925,000 in 2005. (Mexico, Latin America's top tourist destination, attracts 20m foreigners a year.) Lonely Planet, a travel publisher, has chosen Colombia as one of its top ten travel hotspots for 2006, in large part because of the improvement in safety.

But care is still needed. Lonely Planet advises tourists to steer clear of Chocó on the Pacific coast, Putumayo in the far south and “anywhere east of the Andes”, where there

are still guerrillas. America's State Department and the British Foreign Office also warn travellers against wandering into rural areas.

Even so, groups of foreign hikers have recently taken to visiting Ciudad Perdida, one of the largest and oldest pre-Columbian settlements in the Americas, in the jungles of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The area is still home to leftist guerrillas and remnants of their arch-enemies, the right-wing paramilitary militias. But the fact that many other parts of what is a large and physically beautiful country are now safe to visit amounts to progress.