Eagle-Eye Tours

Colombia: Santa Marta Itinerary

Link: Colombia: Santa Marta

Tour Overview

Colombia's Caribbean coast and the isolated Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta offer a rewarding combination of endemic birds, mountain forests and coastal wetlands. Our tour begins near Barranquilla, exploring tropical dry forest and the mangroves of Salamanca before climbing into the Santa Marta Mountains.

With four nights at Mountain House, we have time to explore forests at different elevations, from the lodge surroundings to the San Lorenzo Ridge. We will search for endemics such as Santa Marta Parakeet, Santa Marta Warbler, Santa Marta Woodstar, Santa Marta Blossomcrown and White-tailed Starfrontlet, alongside colourful trogons, toucanets and tanagers.

We then descend to La Guajira, where dry scrub and coastal lagoons provide a striking change of scenery and birdlife. Here we look for regional specialties such as Vermilion Cardinal and Tocuyo Sparrow, with opportunities to enjoy flamingos and other waterbirds during a lagoon boat outing. Throughout the tour, an Eagle-Eye Tours guide and a local guide help us explore these varied habitats.

The tour finishes in Bogotá and can be combined with our main Colombia birding tour.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival and Orientation

Our Colombia: Santa Marta birding tour starts in Barranquilla, a port city along the Caribbean coast. We meet for dinner at our hotel to discuss the adventure ahead. Night in Barranquilla.

Day 2: Salamanca and the Santa Marta Mountains



We will leave our hotel just before dawn, taking a box breakfast with us. On the outskirts of Barranquilla, we will look for Chestnut-winged Chachalaca, Bicolored Wren and other birds of the tropical dry forest and surrounding wetlands. We then drive east, parallel to the coast, stopping at Isla de Salamanca National Park. Salamanca protects extensive mangroves, where we will look for Sapphire-bellied Hummingbird, although this can be a difficult species to find. We will also stop at one or two roadside ponds. After lunch at a restaurant, we continue into the Santa Marta Mountains to our lodge. Night at Mountain House.

Day 3, 4 & 5: Santa Marta Mountains



The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is an isolated mountain range rising above Colombia's Caribbean coast. From our base at Mountain House, we will explore forests at different elevations, looking for the region's many endemic birds. Much of our birding takes place along the road to Cuchilla de San Lorenzo, with 4WD vehicles allowing us to reach the higher forests and ridge. We have three full days here, followed by another morning in the mountains on Day 6. This gives us time to explore above and below the lodge and revisit areas for species we are still seeking. Around the lodge, we will watch for hummingbirds such as Santa Marta Woodstar and Santa Marta Blossomcrown, along with Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Black-capped Tanager and Santa Marta Brushfinch. Santa Marta Screech-Owl is another possibility on an early morning or evening outing. At higher elevations, we will look for Santa Marta Parakeet, Santa Marta Antpitta, Sierra Nevada Antpitta, White-tailed Starfrontlet, Santa Marta Warbler and Yellow-crowned Whitestart. Other possibilities include Rusty-headed and Streak-capped Spinetails, Hermit Wood-Wren and Golden-breasted Fruiteater. Below the lodge, we will explore forest roads and feeding areas for Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner, Black-fronted Wood-Quail, Masked Trogon, Groove-billed Toucanet, and Yellow-legged and Black-hooded Thrushes. White-tipped Quetzal may also be encountered during our mountain outings. Nights at Mountain House.

Day 6: Santa Marta Mountains to La Guajira



We begin with a final morning of birding in the Santa Marta Mountains before descending through Minca, stopping along the way to explore lower-elevation habitats. Here we may encounter Golden-winged Sparrow, White-vented Plumeleteer and Swallow Tanager. We then head east across the Caribbean lowlands into La Guajira, where dry scrub and coastal wetlands introduce a different variety of birds. Depending on our arrival time, we will begin exploring the area, looking for specialties such as Vermilion Cardinal, Buffy Hummingbird and Orinocan Saltator. Night at Guajira Casa del Mar.

Day 7: La Guajira and Flight to Bogotá



We will spend the morning birding around Camarones and Los Flamencos, exploring dry forest and scrub for regional specialties. Possibilities include Green-rumped Parrotlet, Black-crested Antshrike, White-whiskered Spinetail, Slender-billed Tyrannulet and Tocuyo Sparrow. We explore the coastal lagoons at Los Flamencos by boat, looking for American Flamingos, Roseate Spoonbills, Reddish Egrets and Scarlet Ibis. Later, we transfer to Riohacha Airport for our flight to Bogotá, where we gather for a final dinner. Night in Bogotá.

Day 8: Departure or Connection to the Main Tour

Our Colombia: Santa Marta birding tour ends today. Those returning home can depart, while those joining our main Colombia tour have the day at leisure before meeting the arriving participants for the welcome dinner.

What to Expect

Overview

This is a fast-paced birding tour with early starts and long days in the field. We sometimes head out before breakfast, particularly for visits to the San Lorenzo Ridge and birding in the Caribbean lowlands. Four consecutive nights at Mountain House give us time to explore different elevations without changing accommodation. Uneven terrain, rough mountain roads and hot, humid lowland conditions can make the days demanding.

Food

Most meals are at our accommodation, with some restaurant meals and occasional picnic lunches. On early-start days, we may take a packed breakfast or return to the lodge after birding. Each evening, we compile the day’s checklist, review our observations and discuss the following day’s plans.

Accommodation

Accommodation ranges from basic to comfortable hotels and lodges, including four nights at Mountain House in the Santa Marta Mountains. Our mountain base provides access to birding areas above and below the lodge. Internet access at remote accommodation may be limited or unreliable.

Walking

Walking is generally easy to moderate, at a slow birding pace, with outings of up to approximately 5 km (3 miles). Uneven ground and hot, humid conditions can make walks more demanding. Much of our birding takes place along quiet roads, with some walking on forest trails.

Elevation

Our mountain birding includes outings to the San Lorenzo Ridge, reaching approximately 2,600 m (8,500 ft). We also spend the final night in Bogotá at approximately 2,600 m (8,500 ft).

High elevations can affect anyone, regardless of fitness. We recommend discussing the tour's elevations and physical demands with your doctor before booking, particularly if you have a heart or lung condition, other relevant health concerns, or a history of altitude illness.

Driving

Driving varies from short journeys between birding sites to transfers of up to approximately four hours. In the Santa Marta Mountains, we use 4WD vehicles on rough, bumpy roads, particularly for outings to the San Lorenzo Ridge. Participants should be comfortable with these conditions.

Climate

During March and April, the Caribbean lowlands are hot, with daytime temperatures around 30–33°C (86–91°F) and nights around 23–25°C (73–77°F). La Guajira can be particularly hot and dry. Conditions are considerably cooler in the mountains, with temperatures around 12–22°C (54–72°F), depending on elevation and time of day. Early mornings on the San Lorenzo Ridge can feel chilly. Bring layers, including a warm fleece, sun protection and rain gear.

Boat Trip

We explore the coastal lagoons at Los Flamencos in a rustic boat with a handmade sail. The outing lasts approximately two hours, although its duration varies with wind conditions.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes
• All meals and soft drinks
• Excellent accommodation
• 5 - 8 Participants will be guided by one EET guide and 1 local guide
• Park entry/ tour fees
• Airport Transportation
• Ground transportation (bus or van with driver)
• Flight from Riohacha to Bogota at the end of the tour

Tour Price Does Not Include
• Flights to and from start/end location
• Travel Insurance
• Items of a personal nature
• Alcoholic Beverages
