

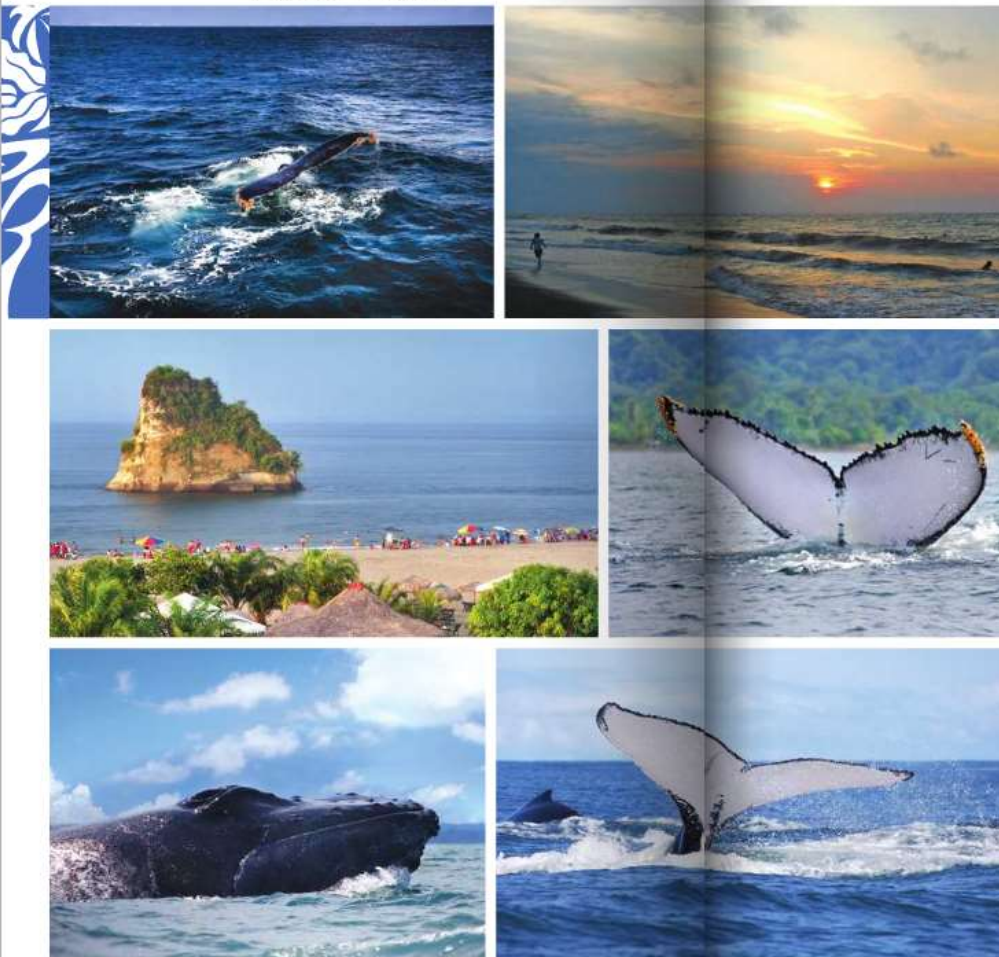
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# Humpback **Whales** Colombia



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# Whale Watching

Few sensations compare with watching a 40-ton whale leap out of the sea and the elegance of its serrated tail just before it sinks down into the deep. Watching humpback whales is one of the most wonderful impressions the animal kingdom can leave on the minds of men.

From July to November of every year, Colombia's Pacific coast, stretching from the Nariño department in the south up to Chocó, becomes the destination for humpback whales on their 8,000-mile odyssey up from the Antarctic and southern Chile in search of the warm waters required to mate, give birth and raise their cubs. This stretch of ocean is transformed into a natural nursery and a place to observe some of the specie's most characteristic behavior.

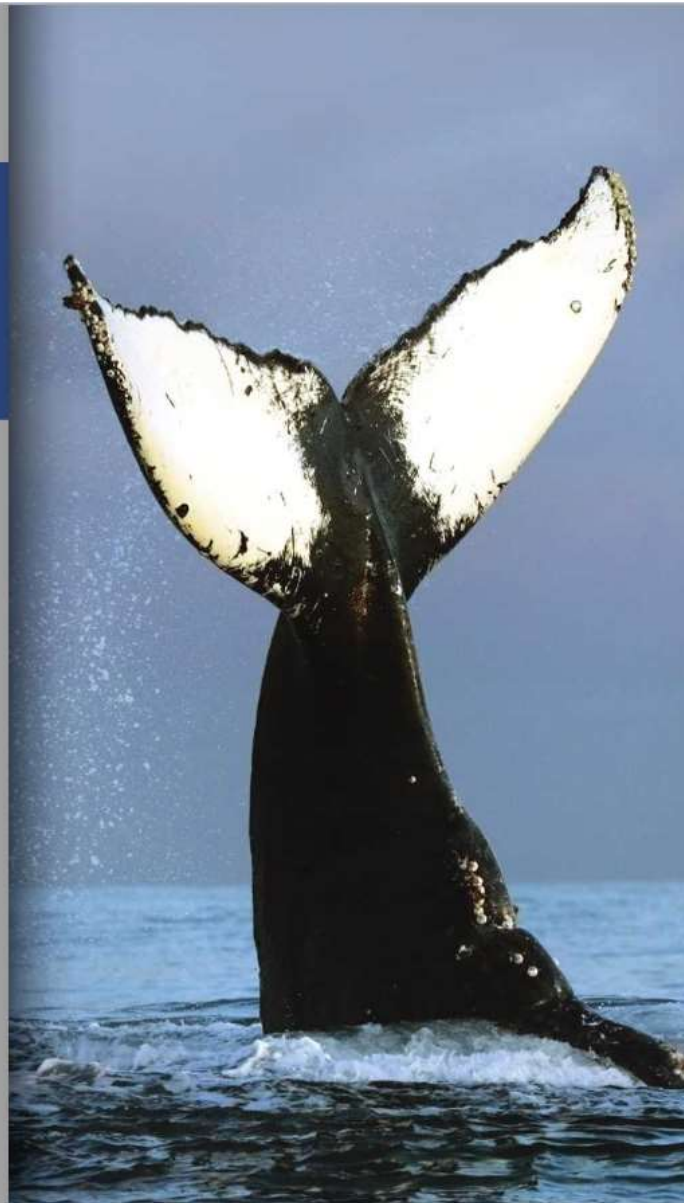
In Colombia, observation of the event is possible thanks to the slow swimming of the whales close to the coast and past beaches, bays and cliffs that form strategic natural grandstands. General ocean conditions allow for a marvelous encounter that is fun, safe and, above all, respectful. It is very important for whale watchers to bear in mind that this marine mammal is a vulnerable species and that their behavior as responsible tourists has much to do with keeping the number of whales from falling.

Given the wide range of behaviors on display, including fin slapping and lob tailing, breaches and dives, yubarta or humpback whale watching is undoubtedly one of the marine world's most amazing spectacles.

And Colombia offers incomparable destinations for whale watchers such as Málaga bay, Nuquí, Bahía Solano and the Gorgona and Utría national parks, where beach conditions give humans a chance to discover the nature's wisdom and order while engaged in these marvelous encounters.

This whale watcher's guide hopes to shed light on the conditions and characteristics of these age-old cetaceans and help us understand their behavior and the reasons for their migration along Colombia's Pacific coast. It will also serve as a valuable tool for travelers wishing to identify the places, seasons, conditions and requirements for whale watching in Colombia, beginning usually around July and lasting through the second half of the year in a ritual that is repeated every year.

Colombia is honored by the presence of humpback whales, and travelers are privileged to partake in this exclusive, unforgettable and, perhaps, unrepeatable experience—the powerful fin slapping and acrobatic jumps, and the booming songs sung in mating rituals. These are only a few of the behaviors displayed by our illustrious annual visitors.





# Whales: Ocean giants

Whales are the largest animals to ever have lived, larger even than huge dinosaurs such as the Brachiosaurus and the Diplodocus. Of all whales, the blue whale is the largest, measuring up to 30 meters long. Below you'll find some of the characteristics associated with the five whale species most frequently observed in the world's oceans.

## Minke Whale or Lesser Rorqual

(Balaenoptera acutorostrata)

**Length:** 8-10 meters **Weight:** 6-9 tons

**General Description:** Currently threatened by Japanese hunters, this whale lives up to 30 years and feeds on crustaceans and small fish. Its one or two small, pointed head and its small body make it difficult to see. The best place to observe these whales are Western Scotland and Ireland, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and the St. Lawrence estuary and Fundy Bay in Canada.



Although the minke is one of the smallest whales, it measures up to 10 meters and weighs the same as two 5-ton elephants.

## Humpback or Yubarta Whale

(Megaptera novaeangliae)

**Length:** 12-16 meters **Weight:** 25-40 tons

**General Description:** Seriously decimated by hunters until 1980, they live from 40-60 years and feed on krill and small fish. They belong to the rorqual species and are characterized by a long, robust body and pleats in their chest and throat skin. They are called "humpbacked" because of the bump supporting the dorsal fin and their habit of arching before diving. Their scientific name refers to their huge pectoral fins and to New England, the first place they were scientifically described. They live in all oceans and most of their populations are migratory, feeding at the Poles during summer



Whales continued to evolve for another 20 million years (20 million years). The front hooves of artiodactyls became fins, the rear hooves and hair disappeared, the tail flattened out into a horizontal fin and the nasal cavities began moving toward the top of the head to form the spiracle. These transformations gave cetaceans the autonomy they required to become exclusively aquatic animals.

A 150-ton blue whale weighs as much as 2,200 men each weighing 65 kilos. Its heart can reach the size of a small automobile and weigh around 900 kilos. The beating of its heart can be heard up to 3 kilometers away.



## Blue Whale

(Balaenoptera musculus)

**Length:** 25-30 meters **Weight:** 150 tons

**General Description:** Drastically reduced in number due to hunting before 1960, they live 90-30 years, feed on krill and pelagic crustaceans and have bluish-brown skin color that owes them their name. They swim far from shore but can be spotted in the Pacific Ocean along the US, Mexican and Chilean coasts, as well as in Sri Lanka, the Icelandic Snaefellsnes Peninsula and the St. Lawrence Estuary in Canada.



## Southern Right Whale

(Eubalaena australis)

**Length:** 11-17 meters **Weight:** 30 tons

**General Description:** Suffered greatly from whalers until the 1930s, live more than 70 years and feed on plankton and crustaceans. Easily identified given frequent slow swimming just underneath the surface and prominent white callosities on its head. Dark-skinned with triangular pectoral fins. Migratory routes are defined, as with humpback and grey whales. Scattered throughout the Indian, South Pacific and South Atlantic Oceans.



## Grey or California Grey Whale

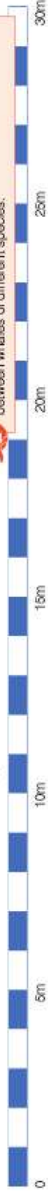
(Eschrichtius robustus)

**Length:** 11-15 meters **Weight:** 25-35 tons

**General Description:** Seriously affected by hunting up until the 1930s, live more than 30 years. Only whale to feed on the ocean floor, burying its muzzle in sediment to hunt annelids, isopod crustaceans and krill. Small round head with a central crest and a grey body with irregular white spots, covered in barnacles and other parasitical crustaceans. They swim slowly along the coast and makes long migrations between the Bering Sea and the Mexican and Lower Californian coasts.



The illustrations show the actual proportional differences in size between whales of different species.



# Whales

## Fish or mammals?

Only halfway through the last century did people begin to worry about whales, these enormous marine mammals whose evolution began some 60 million years ago.



### What is a cetacean?

There are more than 85 marine mammal species known as cetaceans, which are not fish, despite, in many cases, their fish-like appearance and a series of organic and physical characteristics that facilitate their adaptation to and permanence in water.

Unlike fish, they are endotherms (with a great capacity for maintaining high body temperature) and breathe not through gills but through lungs and a nose or spiracle located on the upper part of the head, which means they must take in large amounts of air to support their prolonged submersions. Because they are mammals, cetaceans nurse their young on milk from their breasts.

The order Cetacea is comprised of whales, dolphins and porpoises, which in turn are divided into odontoceti – with teeth for hunting food – and mysticeti – with beards for filtering that hang down from their upper jaws. Whales are mysticeti, with bodies that cut down water resistance, fins that steer them and brake their swimming, and a tail used to propel them forward. There are 15 species of whales currently known to man.

The blood and muscles in whales contain chemical agents that accumulate oxygen and free it in small doses while they are underwater. Regardless of their size, cetaceans

maintain a normal mammal's internal body temperature (around 37 degrees Celsius), have no sweat glands and have a thick layer of fat or blubber, which becomes an energy reserve much needed to maintain heat and during their long journeys.

Aside from the cetaceans, there are two other orders of marine mammals that include the sirenians and the pinnipeds. The first order includes manatees and dugongs, and the second order contains sea lions, walruses and seals. Unlike the pinnipeds that spend part of their life on land, cetaceans are born, live, reproduce and die in water.



# What is Whale watching?

It's the activity during which travelers and researchers can appreciate, from land or a boat, certain physical characteristics and movements that are part of the behavior of the humpback whales when they reach Colombia's Pacific waters every year to mate, give birth and raise their young.



Although there are humpback whales in oceans around the world, certain aspects of whale watching are especially convenient during the whales' presence in the Colombian Pacific: water quality, depth and temperature, as well as the tranquility of the region determined by wind characteristics and the presence of different boats.

Whale watching is often a question of luck and requires patience from tourists and tour operators; a trip to see them is not always successful. Climate and imprudent behavior by tourists are often factors and although whales can be sighted throughout the day, it's best to set out when the sea is calm or at hours when the intense sunlight recedes, particularly during the early morning hours or late in the afternoon.

## History

Halfway through the last century Californians started to show an interest in watching the whales swimming along the coast. This marked the beginning of whale watching as entertainment and a tourist attraction. Later, during that same century, this interest grew in nations around the world. Australians began whale watching in the 1960s; Canadians and Mexicans in the 70s; South Africa, Brazil, Argentina and the Dominican Republic joined in during the 80s; while in Colombia whale watching started in the mid-1990s.

Currently, the whale watching industry exists in close to 90 countries with more than 10 million people interested, who depending on the location and



## Responsible Whale Watching

Although a humpback whale is a truly exciting sight, it's important to remember that this activity is regulated by law and by certain rules of behavior that should be adhered to by tourists and by tour and boat operators. In spite of the fact that whales do not attack people and, on the contrary, try to avoid them, imprudent whale watchers might be left with a less-than-satisfying experience if in their haste to observe these immense cetaceans they commit acts that disrupt, annoy or lead these creatures to cause accidents.

### Boat operators

You are under obligation to follow the guidelines set out by DIMAR (Maritime Authority) regarding requirements for weighing anchor and maneuvering during whale watching:

- In no case should you move closer than 200 meters to a whale.
- When 300 meters or less from a whale you must navigate slowly, at a speed less than the whale's, or leave your engine idling.
- You may approach the whale, slightly behind it, and remain parallel to it, or move ahead of it but without obstructing its passage, allowing the whale to approach your craft. Direct approaches from ahead or behind the whale are threatening.
- You should avoid sudden or continuous changes in speed or direction.

- Do not approach a whale in the company of its young; if you find yourself there be accident it's prudent to retreat slowly and without making waves.
- When whales are jumping or displaying any type of behavior you should retreat; they require space. To move closer than the allowed distance could provoke an accident.
- Large boat operators must remain at least 2 kilometers away when they see researchers making recordings.
- A retreat from a whale must be done without making waves.

### For tourists

The humpback whale's visit to Colombia is a majestic and unforgettable natural event but it is important for whale watchers to control their emotions and remain prudent in their behavior when out watching. Here are a few recommendations:

- Be familiar with boating regulations and make sure your boat operator follows them.
- Do not attempt to break up a group of whales.
- Do not feed the whales or throw food scraps or garbage in the water.
- If while swimming you accidentally encounter a whale, stay at least 30 meters away and try to move away as quickly as possible.
- Try to remain silent; whales are uncomfortable around loud noises.
- Keep your eye on the water and watch for blowing or movement by the whales.



Slow, parallel approach from 200 meters behind.



A maximum of five motorized boats with engines in neutral or turned off are allowed to remain.



Avoid following females with calves.





the infrastructure available can watch whales from land, from boats on the high sea, from above, and even, although accidentally, from the water.

And although whales have suffered cruel treatment from man for many years, they have remained curious about humans, perhaps because they share certain similarities. This factor has made responsible whale watching increasingly accessible and possible all over the world.

According to research on the subject and bibliographic references, humpback whales and their cubs began arriving in Málaga bay around July and August 1920. A few decades later, after whale watching began in California (USA) in the 1940s and in Mexico in the 70s, Colombia joined the list of countries to promote whale watching as a tourist attraction. In 1994, whale watching from boats began in Málaga bay and in 1997 the same activity began in Nuquí and Bahía Solano.

Around 2001, also in Málaga bay, the first sightings took place from land.

Since then, a lookout point in this bay has served as a platform for tourists and research scientists. Little by little, in Nuquí and Bahía Solano as well as Buenaventura, an effort has been made to accommodate this activity as a tourist attraction and create places for interested persons to arrive and watch the whales.

### Seasons

The whale season in Colombia begins in July and lasts until the end of November. A few whales remain through the beginning of December. The humpbacks arrive gradually, not all at the same time, and generally do not remain in the same location. Certain groups return to the Ecuadorian Pacific and others swim up to Panama and Costa Rica.

The males usually return quickly to southern Chile and the Antarctic once they have finished mating. Young whales are rarely seen in Colombia since they have no additional needs other than feeding. When whales give birth they stay on for another four months to



nurse their cubs, which ensures the constitution cubs need to survive the long return trip to the southernmost region of the world.

### Watching from land

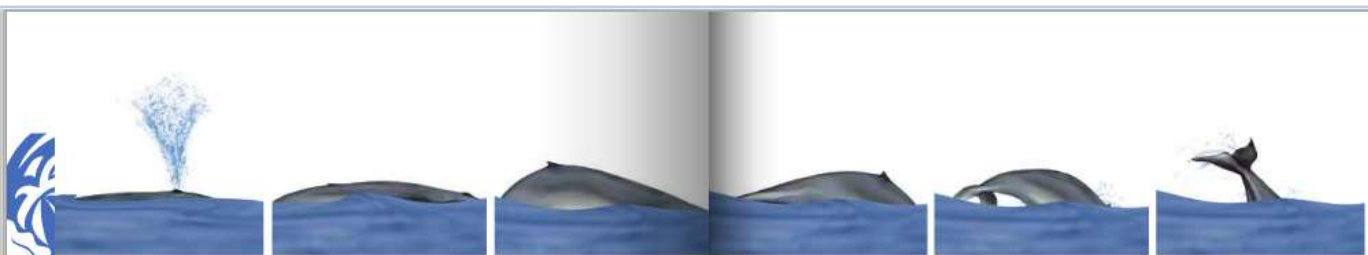
It is frequently said that whales can only be seen sporadically from land and that this type of whale watching is less reliable. However, this form of observation has certain advantages for travelers who don't wish to set out to sea and, above all, for the whales, since it greatly reduces the pressure on them. With a lot of patience and a good set of binoculars it is possible to take away unforgettable images and memories.

Colombia's long, solitary Pacific coastline facilitates peaceful observation from land, especially when the humpbacks are in shallow, superficial waters close to shore. Whales have been spotted 50 meters from the beach. When these cetaceans are left undisturbed it is possible to watch them for days swimming in the same area. Whale watching from land is ideal for people who experience seasickness when navigating on open waters for extended periods.

### Watching from the water

Whale watching from a boat is more popular than watching from land because of the possibility of following the whales, observing how they swim and other behaviors, as long as whale watching regulations are observed, naturally. It is important to remember that several different kinds of whales can be observed: mothers with their young, groups of whales during courtship, and singing whales. Under all circumstances, it is absolutely necessary to respect the minimum distance and behave respectfully, especially when watching a mother and her cub since they are vulnerable and require absolute calm. By pressuring them, you may cause them to be separated, endangering the young whale's life.

Please note that even during the whale season, whale watching requires enormous patience since several factors are in play, particularly climate conditions and controlled behavior of tourists and operators to guarantee the tranquility whales need. Because of the motion of the waves, it's not a good idea to use binoculars; they can cause seasickness.



Immersion sequence

## Following the whales and understanding their immersions

Whale watching consists essentially of following and observing a group of whales. Once spotted, the boat should follow the whales carefully, respecting DIMAR navigation regulations, maintaining the prescribed distance and avoiding noises that might disturb them.

Groups of whales accompanied by their cubs generally come up to breathe every 3-5 minutes and are therefore frequently visible, but they must be observed from a sensible distance without the cetaceans realizing humans are near, which is why experts advise visitors to keep their distance. Large groups during courtship or displaying aggressive behavior will breach the surface every 1-2 minutes, but they move very quickly and therefore warrant extra precautions; whales displaying aggressive behavior may not see a boat and cause accidents.

Groups of singing whales take longer to breach the surface – from 30-40 minutes – during which time it is easier to hear than see them; a whale's song can be heard from a boat, even if the animal is 100 meters away and under water.

When the humpbacks come up for air they produce a very loud noise through their spiracles and blow out a semi-spherical cloud of steam and carbon dioxide that may rise up to three meters high, depending on the power of the exhalation. The whale

then shows its hump and often its tail before submerging again.

These movements are typical of the whale while moving from one place to another. When the whales are not traveling from one location to another they can be found playing in a single place, jumping and slapping their tails and fins.

## Whale watching and other equipment

Although the rain and fog are factors that can often alter a day of whale watching, it is important to remember that Colombia's Pacific region is always rainy and therefore it is important to bring



### Recommendations

Regardless of the weather, the following is a list of recommendations for whale watchers:

- Hat to keep sun off
- Always wear a flotation device/jacket
- Binoculars
- Sun glasses with UV filter
- Sunscreen
- Hydrating drinks and light food
- A garbage bag is essential
- Water-proof bag to protect belongings
- A good camera, preferably with a lens that can zoom in for close shots
- Non-skid deck shoes for boats
- Seasickness pills
- Optional binoculars and GPS to identify movement patterns

along water-proof ponchos and plastic bags, preferably with hermetic seals to protect documents and personal items such as cameras and electronic equipment.

## Avoiding seasickness

The medical explanation for seasickness is a temporary affection of the semi-circular inner ear channels, which contain liquid and are responsible for maintaining balance and notifying the brain of our position in space. Aboard a boat, the motion of the waves can produce changes in the liquid inside these channels, thus causing the brain to receive a different signal.

While whale watching, there are times when a boat will stop its engine or place it in neutral. This often causes people to feel seasick, usually when the pause extends to several minutes while staring at a fixed point. In case of seasickness, we recommend refreshing one's face with sea water and watching the horizon while balance is regained.

Another thing to keep in mind is food intake. Although it isn't advisable to eat a heavy meal or breakfast, neither is it a good idea to set sail on an empty stomach. If you'll be watching during the morning, have a light breakfast without coffee or mate, which stimulate the nervous system. It's also a good idea for those who stayed up late or consumed large quantities of alcohol the night before to remain on shore.

There are several types of seasickness medications available on the market. However, please remember that some

of them can make you drowsy. And although not everyone who gets in a boat gets seasick, it can be a good idea to prevent it by taking a pill one hour before boarding, as long as there are no contraindications.

## Observation, conservation and support

A good picture of a whale is undoubtedly a precious memory, but it can also be a resource for researchers who study and identify humpback whales. And so, aside from the pleasure of simply watching whales, travelers have a chance to be productive, helping to conserve and collaborate with scientific studies by taking careful notes of the characteristics of the whales they see, as well as the conditions and the location where they were spotted. To this end, whale watches, aside from their cameras, should carry a notebook in which to jot down details such as:

- Location of sighting, area, municipality, department, etc.
- Number of members in the group, specifying adults and cubs
- Description of whale's size, using boat as a reference
- Unusual features such as protuberances or scars from fights, accidents or ships' propellers
- Details regarding color of skin and physical features (head, tail, dorsal fin)
- List of behaviors exhibited and blowing
- Immersions and time between each one

See directory (p. 56) for information regarding institutions and NGOs that work in whale conservation.



# Learning about Humpbacks

The humpback whale with its voluminous body is the third heaviest whale, the fourth longest and one of the most characteristic of the rorqual family (from the Norwegian rorqual meaning "furrow whale", referring to the 12-114 folds of skin these animals have on their throats). Thanks to these folds, humpbacks can expand their mouths incredibly to take in large amounts of water and filter it with their beards, allowing in only the food they will consume.

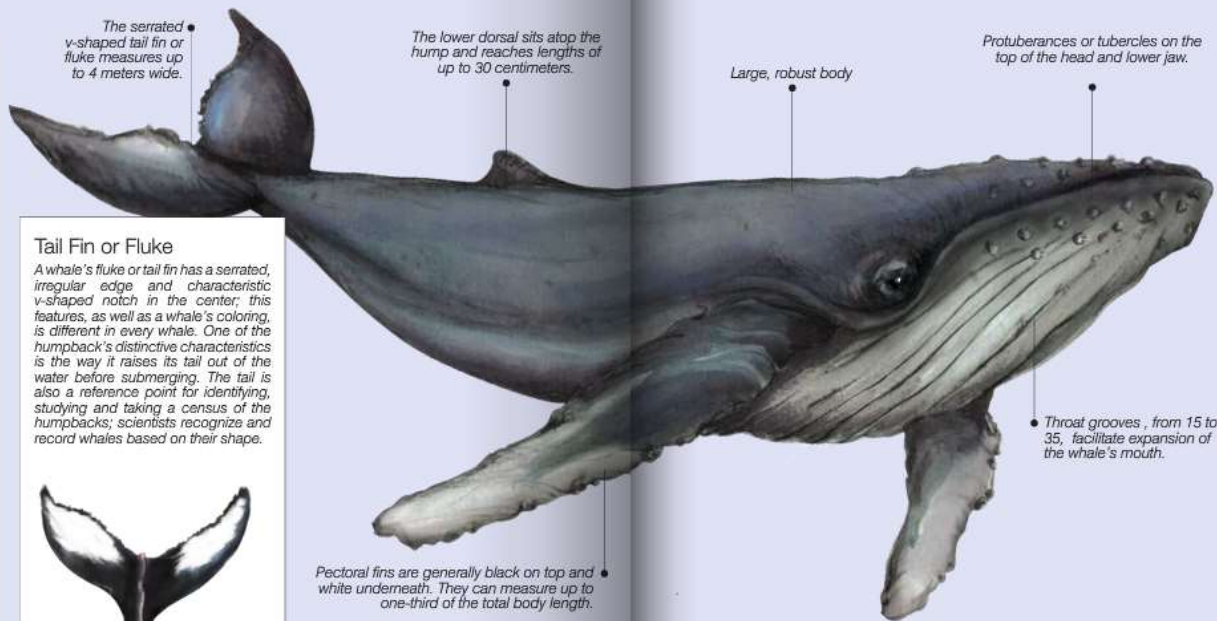
Rorquals are part of most of the bearded mysticeti and cetacean families. Their skin pigmentation, coloring and the marks on the lower part of their tail fin are unique to each animal, which makes them exclusive markings like human fingerprints. The humpback is also known for its long pectoral fins measuring up to one-third of their body length; from which their scientific name -- mega (large), ptera (wing) -- derives.

Because of their slow swimming and habit of jumping and slapping the water with their tails and fins, the humpback is one of the most interesting whales to watch, and one of the easiest. Especially now, when thanks to protective legislation the world-wide population varies between 25,000 and 37,000. In 1966, the year when commercial hunting was outlawed, the number of living specimens had fallen to several hundred.



## Humpback or yubarta?

Both terms mean the same thing; the difference is that the second word derives from the Basque root "xibarte", which in English means hump. The word "yubarta" is more common in the Pacific region and among certain groups of researchers. The tail fin of this species is inserted on a hump and its form varies from blunt to pointed. The presence of this hump and a habit of arching right before diving give this whale its name of "humpback" or "yubarta".



## Tail Fin or Fluke

A whale's fluke or tail fin has a serrated, irregular edge and characteristic v-shaped notch in the center; this features, as well as a whale's coloring, is different in every whale. One of the humpback's distinctive characteristics is the way it raises its tail out of the water before submerging. The tail is also a reference point for identifying, studying and taking a census of the humpbacks; scientists recognize and record whales based on their shape.



**Common name.** Humpback or yubarta whale

**Scientific name.** *Megaptera novaeangliae*

**Class.** Mammalia

**Order.** Cetacea

**Suborder.** Mysticeti

**Family.** Balaenopteridae



Whale and her cub

### Courtship and mating

Courtship is defined as the conquest during which the male sings, competes with and attacks other males rivaling for a female. At the end of this episode, the female mates with the winning male, whose skin is often

marked by injuries from courtship battles.

Because of the location of genital organs, humpback whales mate belly-to-belly, like other cetaceans such as dolphins and the southern right whale. Although this moment has yet to be observed and remains a mystery to scientists, mating follows courtship, when male and female meet and dive into the depths looking for privacy.



At birth, whale cubs weigh between 680 kg and one ton and measure from 4.4 - 6 meters. During their first months they feed on mother's milk to acquire enough fat to produce the energy needed to make their first migration south to Chile and the Antarctic.



### Reproduction

After mating, the whale begins a 10 to 12-month gestational period. The humpback whale can give birth every 2-3 years and can have up to 12 cubs in a lifetime, but there are no known cases of more than one cub per pregnancy. The cubs are born breach, thus taking advantage of the oxygenated blood in the placenta

until the last moment. Once out of the womb, the mother guides her cub to the surface to breathe air for the first time.

### Life cycle

After birth, a mother will nurse her cub for four months in the Pacific waters, after which time the cub acquires the constitution required for traveling

to the southernmost portion of the planet. During the cub's first year, it enjoys maternal protection, learning to eat plankton, hunt its prey and relate to other members of its species. However, during this stage of a whale's life it is more vulnerable and will have to fend off attacks from sharks or orcas, a few of the whales' predators.

### Feeding

Depending on the region where they live, humpback whales eat different kinds of fish and crustaceans such as herring, sardines, capelin, mackerel, anchovies, shrimp, copepods and pelagic amphipodes. These species live at the planetary poles where whales spend their summers.

The humpbacks that travel to Colombia feed essentially on the enormous amounts of krill available

Whales spend a short time with their young, only a few months and very rarely more than two years, although a whale will sometimes meet up with a female cub to assist in the birth of her grand-cub. For whales emigrating from Antarctica to the southeast Pacific Ocean, these first days of a whale's relationship with its mother take place right along Colombia's Pacific coast.

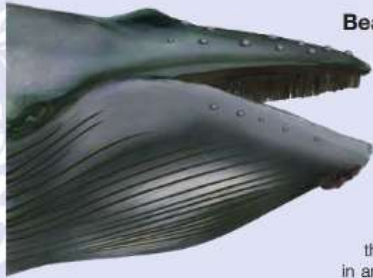
The species reaches puberty between the ages of 2 and 4 and reaches sexual maturity between the ages of 10 and 12. The humpback whale lives to be 30 to 40 years old; there have, however, been cases of humpbacks that have lived to be more than 60 years old.



The bubble net technique used by humpback whales to hunt food consists of several whales swimming to encircle schools of krill. They create a spiral that forms a curtain of bubbles, forcing crustaceans together and to the surface where the cetaceans swim up from below with open mouths, engulfing thousands of compressed prey. This type of behavior is seen only in feeding zones, not in places like the Colombian Pacific or the intertropical region.







### Beards

Instead of teeth, the humpback has between 270 and 400 baleen plates hanging on either side of the mouth along the upper jaw. Each of these plates is around 70 centimeters long and is comprised of 35 black or dark brown bristles with lighter colored tips. These plates filter the large amounts of water taken in and eliminated once a whale has caught its food.



### Breathing

Whales breathe through the blowhole or spiracle on their backs. Their breathing is a voluntary and conscious act since whales must think in order to carry out this task and they control their nasal passages, opening and closing them to hold air in under water where they remain up to 45 minutes and can descend to 148 meters. Intervals between breaths last from 10 to 30 seconds.

### Blowing

Blowing is the result of a whale's exhalation. The blowing creates a kind of semi-circular, shrub-shaped cloud up to three meters high. This cloud is a mixture of carbon dioxide and steam created by the powerful exhalation. Blowing produces a sound similar to the one made when breathing through a snorkel and is louder when the humpback is excited, becoming a kind of snort.



### Organization and communication

According to observations made in Colombia, the most common whale group is the mother-cub group. This species is relatively solitary but often congregates in feeding areas where they come together to hunt their prey. The males usually travel and sing on their own and young whales will accompany their elders in the feeding areas but rarely in reproductive zones.

To communicate, whales produce two kinds of sound: social sounds and

songs. The first are performed by males and females in reproduction and feeding areas and are issued via the larynx or during jumps and fin and tail slapping.

Whales receive sounds through their ears and issue sounds using their larynx, although it has been established that they have no vocal cords. Sound generation in this species is, therefore, a mystery, since it is not related to exhalation.

### The songs

Whale songs deserve special mention and have been defined as a series of repetitive and predictable sounds issued by solitary male humpback whales. The songs are related to courtship and reproduction and are similar to human songs in that both are a sequence of sounds that combine to form phrases. A phrase lasting 2 to 4 minutes and then repeated is called a theme and a collection of themes is called a song.

Each song can last up to 30 minutes and a whale will repeat it constantly for hours or even days. As time elapses, each whale's song is modified, and depending on the individual case will grow quieter or louder. A song is also a way of differentiating between whale populations since the songs of one group will differ completely from those of another. Likewise, analyses and recordings of whale songs show that although patterns may be similar, the combinations that comprise a song are never repeated.

### Spots and Pleats

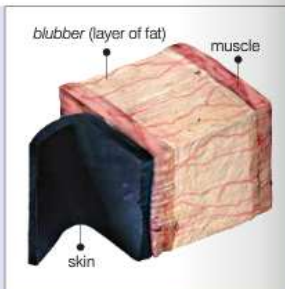
At birth, whales are usually white with numerous whitish spots. These features change over time until the skin on their backs is predominately dark grey and black and their bellies are white. The humpback whale has a number of pleats between belly and throat that make it possible for the whale's mouth to stretch up to four times its normal size.



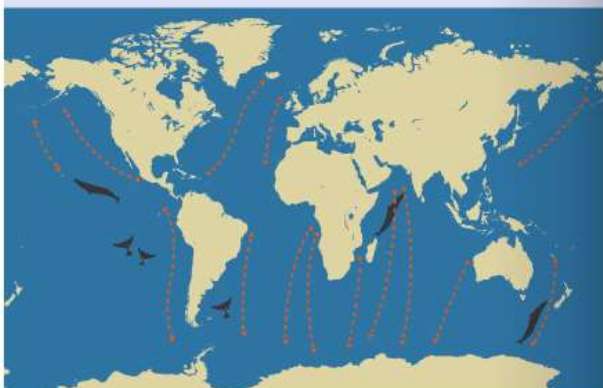
## Skin

Whales have no scales – their skin is dark grey and although it looks smooth, it is rough and hard to the touch. They have warts around their muzzles from which a single hair grows up to a maximum of 5 cm., which are thought to fulfill the sensory function of detecting temperature changes. Whales have a dense layer of fat called blubber underneath their skin up to 50 cm. thick that insulates them from the cold and is a source of energy.

Whale cubs are born with whitish skin that is slightly softer but quickly



hardens. The adipose tissue develops during the early months while the cubs nurse in Colombia's Pacific waters.



## Migration

Studies using photo-identification have determined that whales that arrive in the Colombian Pacific come from the Antarctic Peninsula and the Strait of Magellan following a 8,500-kilometer migration lasting 2-3 months – one of the longest by any species in the world. The

humpback whales emigrate to Colombia when winter conditions in the southern hemisphere make it necessary for them to seek the warmer Pacific waters where they can carry out essential life-cycle processes: breeding, birth and carrying for their young.



## Parasites and Epibionts

Whales host different kinds of endoparasites and ectoparasites; the former includes certain small crustaceans called cyamids that feed off the whale's skin and are commonly referred to as "whale lice". Barnacles are another type of organism that does not affect the whale but that attaches to the whale's skin and from there feeds on plankton.

## Predators

The humpback whale's natural predators during its normal life cycle include certain sharks and other species of cetaceans like the orca and the false killer whale. Unfortunately, and in spite of behavioral changes in the past few decades, the human species continues to pose the greatest threat to the humpback whale's survival.





### Behavior and playfulness

Mating and childrearing needs determine behavior of humpback whales in mating waters. Although mating has never been observed, certain aerial movements associated with games, excitement, courtship and aggression among males vying

for females have been identified. These behaviors by whale cubs and adults include jumping and head and tail slapping, all of which can be observed. Humpback behavior is therefore very conspicuous – eye-catching and visually and acoustically very striking.

### Flapping

Flapping is the name given to the whale's striking of the water with its long pectoral fins while lying on its side or back. This movement is characterized by its power, incredible volume and the splashes it produces. Flapping is associated with sexual affiliations or contact made between mother and cub. Soft flapping by whales is part of courtship while powerful flapping is a form of pushing rival males away.

### Tail flapping

Tail flapping has been interpreted as a warning or a sign of discomfort. The humpback raises its tail out of the water and then strikes the

surface with it, or lets it fall; both movements can be interpreted as aggressive behavior. Tail flapping can be seen when a male whale appears before its rivals or in the presence of a nearby vessel and may be a warning, but if the movement is slow and cautious it is more than likely a playful gesture.

### Spy hopping

More than a movement, spy hopping is usually a watchful raising of the head out of the water that helps orient a whale or locate a source of noise or circumstances disturbing it. It may also be a head movement made prior to turning or breaching.

### Breaching

Some experts have detected more than 100 kinds of whale breaches in a single observation session, interpreting these breaches according to the manner in which they are executed. Breaches are one part of a series of eye-catching aerial behavior associated with whale communication and their mating, child rearing and general welfare requirements. The different breaches are common among both adults and their young and can be classified as follows:



Belly breach



Spin breach



Tail breach

**Belly breaches.** These seem to be associated with excitement, orientation outside the water, or a warning sign used to protect a whale from predators. To achieve this movement, also known as a belly flop, the whale lifts part of its body out of the water and then drops onto its belly.

**Spin breach.** Related to warnings, associations, playfulness, orientation outside the water, muscle development and a manner of eliminating parasites stuck to the skin. The whale breaches the water vertically and almost entirely, then spins and falls on its side or back.

**Tail breach.** Associated with aggression and discomfort and like other movements this breach produces very loud noises under and above the surface of the water. These movements have a huge aural as well as optical impact. In a tail breach a whale exhibits and strikes its tail violently against the water.





## Other animals seen while whale watching

The humpback whale is the main objective while whale watching but the animal kingdom is so fascinating and generous that while on an excursion it is possible to see observe other species such as pelicans, bottlenose dolphins, spotted dolphins, tuna and sea turtles – an exciting adventure that requires careful attention and constant readiness with the camera.



Pelican

**Pelicans.** Lives along the coast and in mangrove ecosystems and is one of the so-called seabirds. The common pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) observed in Colombia is a very large social bird measuring between 114 and 137 cm. with a large beak and an enormous gular sac. It is common to see these birds in majestic formation along the coasts, beating their wings slowly. In short glides close to the surface of the water. They dive down to catch fish or hunt them by submerging their head and neck from a floating position.

**Magnificent frigatebird.** (*Fregata magnificens*). A bird commonly found along the Caribbean and Pacific from Mexico to the Galapagos Islands. One meter long and weighing approximately 1.2 – 1.7 kilos, the males, also known as *tijeretas* because of their scissors-



Magnificent frigatebird

shaped tail, can be recognized by their prominent red throat pouch that inflates even more during courtship. Although not aquatic, frigatebirds feed on small fish near the surface and on other marine animals, which they attack in order to force them to regurgitate their food.

**Dolphins.** Two of the most common species of dolphins in the Colombian Pacific are the bottlenose and the spotted dolphin. The former, robust with a short snout, also known as the tursiops (*Tursiops truncatus*), can be



Bottlenose dolphin

recognized by its light to dark grey coloring and high curved dorsal fin. The spotted dolphin is also known as the pantropical dolphin (*Stenella attenuata*) and has a moderately long snout and a high, curved dorsal fin. Spotted dolphins eat cephalopods and pelagic fish and grow to be 1.7 – 2.4 meters long, while the bottlenose measures 2.1 – 2.9 meters.

**Tuna.** Over twelve different species, and one of the most common fish in the Pacific, the yellowfin tuna (*Thunnus albacores*) is a robust fish measuring up to 239 cm. that navigates in deep water and is a very fast swimmer. Tuna can be spotted when they come up to the surface to feed, making the water appear to be boiling. This pelagic species, capable of vertical jumps, swims in schools organized according to size. Tuna are opportunistic predators and feed on fish, crustaceans and cephalopods.

**Sea turtles.** Although not easily spotted in the turbulent Pacific waters because they hide when they hear a boat engine, sea turtles can be seen from boats when they come up to breathe since their lungs function like



Tuna



Sea turtle

human lungs and the species must come up to the surface approximately every ten minutes. The most common kind is the Caguama Pacific turtle or golfina turtle (*Lepidochelis olivacea*), also the most abundant and smallest of sea turtles, measuring up to 70 cm. The golfina is solitary, reproduces on the beach and feeds on crustaceans and fish.

# Protecting Whales

The International Whaling Commission (IWC), the international entity that protects whales and controls hunting, was founded in 1946 under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. Initially, the IWC's main goal was to regulate hunting and commercialization of these cetaceans, but in 1982 a moratorium on commercial hunting was established, although the measure did not go into effect until 1985-1986.



Sunset in Bahía Solano

Excluded from this legislation, as stipulated in Article VIII of the International Convention, is hunting for scientific purposes, which receives a more flexible treatment. Based on this clause, countries like South Korea and Iceland managed to obtain special permission. Other countries such as Norway, however, and especially Japan, do not comply with regulations and continue to hunt excessively.

Oriental countries are thought to take in close to 400 different species of whales every year for lucrative or political reasons (by authorizing hunting, politicians win many votes from Japanese fishermen). For over half a century, the work of

scientists and marine biologists has been directly linked to the noticeable fall in whale hunting around the world and the change in attitude toward protection and conservation. Studies have altered people's awareness so that these marine mammals are now regarded with admiration and respect.

Biological and chemical contaminants, entanglement in fishing nets, disturbances and damage caused by noise and excessive harassment are all factors that together with collisions with ships and out-of-control hunting have noticeably affected the survival of the humpbacks. Let's protect them!



## Better to protect them...

Although certain countries such as Japan insist on excessive hunting of whales, it is undoubtedly more profitable to conserve than to hunt them; whale watching is an excellent source of income for communities living in areas of influence. Contributions to the preservation of the humpback whales are bound to increase the cetacean population and with it tourism.

In Colombia, the arrival of the humpback whales has provided many families living traditionally from fishing and agriculture alone with a possible source of income associated with the demand for lodging, food, maritime transportation and tour guides for visitors who come to watch the humpback whales.

The economic benefits extend to villagers who earn a living from culture and crafts and find in the whales one of their greatest sources of inspiration. From an environmental perspective, respect for whales is vital to the conservation of other marine species, given the expansive territory covered by the humpbacks in order to meet

their habitat requirements. This species of cetaceans is a cornerstone in the marine ecosystem: if their numbers dwindle, the krill population grows (their main source of food) and if this happens, phytoplankton dies out (krill feed on them), which creates an imbalance in the amount of oxygen generated. If the amount of oxygen drops, many types of fish die. This chain reaction proves just how much more beneficial living whales are to humanity than those killed to feed a few people in the world.



## Scuba diving... Allowed?

En Colombia, no está permitida la práctica. In Colombia, scuba diving is not a legal whale watching practice, nor is swimming next to them. If a diver accidentally comes across a whale, he or she is required to maintain a distance of at least 30 meters and to make an effort to remain unnoticed, especially if the whale is with a cub, in which case it is preferable to swim away as quickly as possible.



# Humpback whale watching in Colombia

A wait lasting many months ends in July when the first humpbacks start to appear along Colombia's southwest coast after an 8,000-kilometer journey from Antarctica and southern Chile in search of the warm Pacific waters where they will mate, give birth and raise their cubs, one of the animal kingdom's most sublime events.



Colombia is located one of the planet's inter-tropical strips of land where instead of defined seasons dry and rainy seasons alternate throughout the year and the climate is isothermal, meaning it does not vary greatly. For this same reason, Pacific waters in Colombia maintain

an average temperature of 25° C. This thermal condition attracts groups of humpbacks up from the Antarctic every year from July to November in search of warm waters in which to carry out activities essential to their life cycle: mating, birth, nursing, child rearing, rest and socialization.



## Humpbacks: the most acrobatic

The humpback is considered the most acrobatic of all whales because of its spectacular breaches, tail lobbing and fin slapping; although a chance to observe this behavior requires a little luck and patience, it is one of the rewards of their annual visit to Colombia.

During the whale season, some 3,000 of these mammals swim particularly close to the coasts of Málaga bay, the Gorgona National Nature Park and the gulfs of Tribugá and Cupica, where they remain for 4 to 5 months, although certain whales return to Ecuador or move north to Panama and Costa Rica. It may be that among the group of whales that emigrates to Colombia, certain males come only to mate and then return to Antarctica while the females that give birth remain begin to nurse their cubs.

Water quality, the limited amount of ships, and the peacefulness of the region are all reasons why the southeast Pacific is the best habitat for humpback whale reproduction.



## Humpback Whale Season in Colombia

**June and July:** first whales arrive

**August:** humpback presence is more noticeable

**September:** highpoint for whale watching in which courtship, mating and births take place

**October:** certain whales start their return to Antarctica and southern Chile

**November:** groups of mothers and cubs begin emigration to southern hemisphere

**December:** the last remaining whales are spotted occasionally



We've taken a look at some of the main characteristics of the humpback whale: their origins, main physical features, distribution throughout the world, principal behaviors and things to keep in mind to protect this species when whale watching.

We've also learned about their long migrations and arrival in Colombia beginning in July of every year. Colombia's Pacific waters is one of their favorite destinations, which provides tourists and researchers with an opportunity to watch them and participate in their conservation. This is undoubtedly one of the main reasons why whale watching has grown in importance.

The following pages, therefore, contain a brief summary of the main tourist attractions in five Colombian locations where cetaceans can be observed: Nuquí, Bahía Solano, Buenaventura, Tumaco and the Gorgona National Nature Park in Guapi, places with the environmental and climatic conditions required for humpback mating and birth and that incorporate a series of

magnificent natural settings that must be seen.

At all these places you'll find travel information for tourists who want to visit the solitary beaches, mangroves and tropical rain forests. This is the Colombian Pacific: an amazing setting for the unforgettable experience of watching humpback whales.





# Nuquí

## Chocó



Guachalito beach, Nuquí

On the western Chocó coast, along the gulf of Tribugá in the municipality of Nuquí, lies a pristine natural paradise that can be divided into several sectors, which aside from their natural beauty, are strategic whale watching locations.

Nuquí consists of a series of lonely Pacific beaches bordered to the north by the dense rain forests of the Vaud mountains, out of which tumble numerous rivers, creeks, waterfalls and streams.

The area surrounding Nuquí is a habitat for countless air, land and sea animals living in harmony with a wide variety of flora, which makes it one of the highly appreciated destinations in Colombia for ecologists and travelers who truly love and respect nature.

### How to get there

The village of Nuquí can only be reached by plane from the country's

interior and by flying through Medellín or Quibdó. A cargo boat can also be taken from the port of Buenaventura; the trip takes about 24 hours. Locations around Nuquí can be reached by boat or by walking along the beach; accessibility in most cases is therefore governed by the tides.

### Observatories and tourist attractions

Nuquí stretches from Arusí point to the Utría inlet and is comprised of many coastal beaches from which whales can be observed. There are eco-hotels and tourist hostels in Utría, on Olímpica Beach near the village, in Guachalito, Coquí and many other parts

of the municipality. All offer conditions required for watching the cetaceans from land. Some of these places even offer boat service with personnel trained to carry out sea excursions. During the day, depending on climatic conditions, it is possible to walk between different locations and follow the whales from a distance as they move along.

### Utría Inlet and National Park

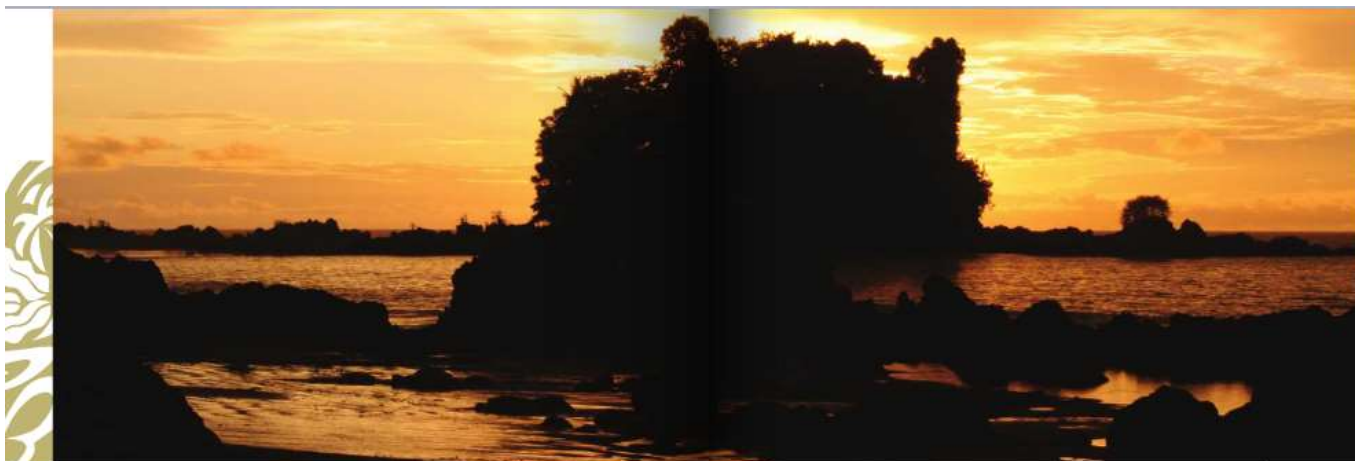
Declared a protected zone in 1987, the Utría inlet was formed by the surrounding foothills that run into the sea to create an enclosure where the waters are extremely calm, just the right conditions for the humpbacks and other migratory species. Geographical conditions change depending on the tides. At low tide, mangrove roots are exposed and air and land fauna take refuge in the branches of the trees. When the tide is high, aquatic species swim among the roots. The area can be explored by travelers in boats and by walking along ecological paths, depending once again on the tides.



Crab



Utría National Park



Sunset in Guachalito

### Nuquí

The urban section of this small Chocó village is comprised of a few streets inhabited by fishermen and farmers – activities that along with traditional cultural pastimes are popular with tourists. Nearby you'll find the long Olímpica beach, ecological jungle paths, the Nuquí river, and mangroves that can be explored in canoes.

### Guachalito

This is one of the most beautiful parts of Nuquí – the kind of paradise one dreams of amidst ocean waves and the musicality of the fauna crouching amongst the vegetation. Guachalito is known for its peacefulness, deserted beaches, exposed rocks bathed by the tide, and thousands of crabs playing hide-and-seek with the occasional hikers who leave their footprints behind on the sand.

### Joví

The diaphanous Joví river and the dense jungle around it, the tunnel created by Pichindé trees and the Chontadura falls make up this charming fishing village to the south of Nuquí.

### Coquí

Aside from its natural charms, the village of Coquí is remembered fondly for the kindness displayed by its inhabitants; let them guide you in nature walks that bring you close to breath-taking locations such as the Verrugatera waterfalls, the Estero mangrove path over the Coquí river, and the Canal and Bejuquillal walks leading to bubbling freshwater springs hidden in the jungle.

### Termales

The main attraction in southern Nuquí is the hot springs only a short walk from the beach. Here, several settlers from other parts of Colombia have worked with natives to build up the tourist trade.

### Morromico beach

Another of the fantastic, solitary locations in Nuquí with a magnificent beach perfect for resting and, of course, whale watching. Morromico is part of the Jurubidá township to the north of Nuquí and near the Utría National Nature Park.



Whale in Nuquí

### Lodging

Some 15 tourist hostels (Posadas Turísticas de Colombia) operate on the beaches and in the Nuquí townships and also offer complete food and transportation services. There are also several lodge-style hotels in the area with everything required for eco-tourism.

### Food

Due to its location along the coast, the main source of food in Nuquí is fish, generally served with locally-grown

products like plantain, rice, yucca and a variety of fruits such as borojo, lulo, pineapple and lime.

### Crafts

The articles produced by the artisans of Nuquí are for the most part fashioned from wood and inspired by the nature around them. Whale tails, dolphins and other marine species spring from the imaginations of local craftsmen and women.



# Bahía Solano

## Chocó

Where whale watching attractions meet some of the most spectacular sunsets in Colombia. Bahía Solano is very popular among ecologists and travelers seeking both of these things as well as many other reasons to visit.



Playa Flores

Situated in northwestern Chocó, this municipality stretches from the northern edge of the Utría inlet to the Gulf of Cupica and all its beaches.

Because of its dense jungle, pristine beaches, warm Pacific waters and many other reasons, Bahía Solano is considered a paradise on Earth. It is a truly magical place and its inhabitants work to keep it that way to ensure their own tranquility and the support of visitors lucky enough to visit the whales that appear like clockwork every year.

### How to get there

Access is from the country's interior and necessarily by plane, with a connection in Medellín. There are also

several weekly flights from Quibdó, the department capital, which land at José Celestino Mutis Airport in Bahía Solano or Ciudad Mutis as this township is also known.

### Observatories and tourist attractions

The extensive Bahía Solano territory is divided into a northern and southern section with the urban Ciudad Mutis in its center. To the south lies the area's largest township, El Valle, and El Almejal Beach, an important whale watching spot.

Near Ciudad Mutis is Huina Beach and to the north Potes, Flores and Nabugá beaches framed by the amazing Pacific Ocean and the dense Baudó

mountains. All are idyllic locations to visit in the company of locals who guide hikers along beaches, through the jungle and over the open sea to see the humpback whales. And when skies are clear, to top off the day... a saffron-colored sun sinks into the sea.



### Ciudad Mutis

This small village, the municipal seat of Bahía Solano, encompasses several hotels, a few shops and a small airport. Outside the village there are several interesting places to visit such as the Chocolatal river, the Mirador de la Virgen observatory and the Mecana beaches. Ciudad Mutis is a hub from which travelers set out in search of the deserted beaches to the north.



Flora of the region



### **El Valle township**

A picturesque and lively village located 18 km south of Ciudad Mutis and the largest village in the municipality. Walk down its streets to get an idea of the trades and customs of people in the area; they are always bustling. Outside the village lie some of the most incredible natural settings in the region: the beaches of El Almejal, El Respingue, Larga and Cuevita, depending on the weather, are a fine choice for whale watching from the coast.

Boats departing from these locations will often stop at additional sites such as the Juná, Tundó and Valle rivers and the Chadó and Tigre waterfalls.

### **Huina beach**

A 20-minute boat ride from Ciudad Mutis, Huina beach is home to fishermen and farmers who also earn a living from tourism, guiding hikers along the beach and through the jungle to lovely settings such as the Chocolatal Falls, the Juna River and Los Deseos, Cocalito, Becerra and Cotudo beaches.

### **Potes beach**

Another of the spectacular destinations along the Gulf of Cupica where the voices of children running along the beach mix with the wildlife celebration. The gentle hills rising out of Baudó jungle act as observatories from which the immense ocean and unforgettable sunsets can be seen, along with the humpback whales who find here the peaceful conditions they need to carry out the activities vital

to their life cycle. Other advantages include hikes along ecological paths through the dense coastal vegetation.

### **Flores beach**

With its long, pristine sandy beaches, this is one of the last corners in Bahía Solano where silence rules. Flores beach is the place for travelers looking to contemplate and fully enjoy nature's clean and abundant offerings. Nature reserves and the Nabugá and Huaca waterfalls are just two of the places to discover in this area inhabited by Afro-Colombians and, further inland, indigenous communities.

### **Lodging**

In the urban areas of El Valle and Ciudad Mutis there are different categories of hotels and hostels. The family-style cabins offered by locals are the most popular option along the beaches in Bahía Solano where a few lodge-type hotels are also available.

### **Food**

Naturally, fish is the staple but many different varieties are available and are prepared in a number of delicious ways. Sierra mackerel, tuna, albacore, yellowtail, scad and skipjack are just a few of the fish served with coconut milk, rice, fried plantain and fresh juices.

### **Crafts**

Decorations and accessories made with natural fibers and seeds are among the most common crafts created by native communities along with wood carvings generally related to the natural regional surroundings and activities. Whale watching and sport fishing are just a few of the motifs that bring life to the carvings.



Flores beach



Sunset in Potes beach



# Buenaventura

## Valle del Cauca



Sunset in Málaga bay

The Vía al Mar – or Ocean Highway – breaks out of the Western Cordillera and winds through a variety of landscapes, including Andean forests and tropical jungles, before ending a 120-kilometer journey that begins in the city of Cali and ends when it meets with the sweet ocean breezes of Buenaventura, Colombia's most important maritime port located on the Pacific coast.

This destination marked by contrasting scenery as well as economic and cultural differences is part of Málaga bay, the humpback whale's largest delivery room. Intense port activity in Buenaventura makes the city a major factor in the country's economy: more than 50% of Colombia's commercial exchanges with other countries pass through these docks. Buenaventura never stops moving, never sleeps; there is always something that needs doing.

Dynamic by day and lively by night, filled with eager Afro-Colombians proud of their race, their people and their port.

### How to get there

Direct flights lasting about 90 minutes are available from Bogotá to the Gerardo Tobar López Airport in Buenaventura every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The main highway to Buenaventura is an approximately 2-hour drive from Cali.



Isla Palma and El Morro

### Whale watching tips

Whale watching in Buenaventura is possible using the city as a base or the hotels in Málaga bay, the area's main whale watching location. In either case, it is essential to use authorized tour operators certified by the DIMAR (Dirección General Marítima, or Maritime Authority) and the CVC (Corporación Autónoma Regional del Valle, or Regional Environmental Authority).

The CVC organizes yearly training sessions in care and recommendations required during whale watching outings. The DIMAR is in charge of the authorization of vessels and ensuring they comply with safety and training requirements. In this area, only 20 vessels at a time can be authorized to whale watch, and only 5 for every group of whales.

### Observatories and tourist attractions

#### Málaga bay

Bordered by the San Juan River, the Pichidó Isthmus and the Pacific Ocean, this region lying to the northeast of Buenaventura covers approximately

126 km<sup>2</sup> and is comprised of the Juanchaco township and several fishing villages, where lodging is available for researchers and tourists who want to watch the humpback whales and, while there, enjoy the variety of natural settings such as the mangroves and the tropical rain forest.

#### Juanchaco

A 45-minute boat ride from the port of Buenaventura. This is the largest village in the area and whale watching expeditions set off from its docks, which also act as a marketplace for fishermen and farmers from all over Málaga bay. The tiny village is known for its beaches, hotels and lively nightlife.

#### Ladrilleros

A 15-minute or a 30-minute hike drive from Juanchaco. This hamlet is known for its beaches and boisterous discos. Just outside Ladrilleros there is a landing strip for small private planes and a high cliff that serves as a whale observatory. This look-out point, strategically located between Juanchaco and Ladrilleros at 20 meters above sea level, is a good place to watch whales from land and



Cliff in Juanchaco



Aguamarina reserve

was remodeled several years ago by a group of scientists who use it in their research.

### **La Barra**

This beach and fishing village lies along the road to Ladrilleros and can be reached either by making the 90-minute hike from Juanchaco or riding in tractors equipped to transport passengers. There are several modest hostels in La Barra and locals offer their humble dwellings to interested visitors.

### **Other points of interest**

From Buenaventura to Málaga bay the landscape is bursting with tropical

rain forest fauna and natural settings like pools, mangroves, and plenty of waterfalls – the most outstanding are La Sierpe, El Ostional, Berrugatero, El Chorro de la Maestra and Las Tres Marías. And the lovely Cucheros, Dorada and Juan de Dios beaches, or the beach at La Plata, provide a quiet corner far from the open sea with thick forest vegetation, mangroves and countless streams.

### **Lodging**

Several hotels in downtown Buenaventura offer whale watching plans with outings that begin at dawn and finish in the late afternoon. There are, however, comfortable hotels or simple houses run by natives all along



La Sierpe

Málaga bay for travelers who come to meet the humpbacks and require a place to stay.

### **Food**

Port gastronomy is always a pleasant surprise, not only because of the quantity and variety of the seafood but also because Buenaventura chefs are capable of creating wonderful flavors and new recipes. Add to the list of traditional dishes such as seafood soups and shrimp and prawn ceviche delicious piangua soup, stuffed avocado, coconut crab, fish pasties and empanadas, fish with cucumbers

and pickled fish and desserts made from coconut and raw cane sugar.

### **Crafts**

El mayor número de artesanos de The majority of artisans from the Pacific coast and the Cauca Valley live in Buenaventura and its surroundings. You'll find baskets, needlework and crochet, and items made from gourds and coconut shells. Indigenous craftsmen and women from the Lower San Juan River territory come to Ladrilleros and Juanchaco to sell their trays, hats, canes, necklaces and earrings.



# Tumaco

## Nariño



El Arco, Tumaco

Whitish-grey, like the enormous pearl once found by a local fisherman, Tumaco lies 300 kilometers up the Pacific coast from Pasto, the capital of the Nariño department.

Tumaco is a village and at the same time a port flooded with the hopes of children playing endless games of soccer on the beach, dreaming of becoming the mega-stars that will fill tomorrow's stadiums. These same youngsters playing on Bocagrande beaches are also the first to herald the annual arrival of the humpbacks. With their "They're coming! They're coming!" they let everyone know they live in one of the most privileged spots for watching these enormous cetaceans.

In Tumaco, the humpbacks' visit can be complemented with a trip through the mangroves, up a nearby hill and

across a bridge, all to the sound of the marimba that pours out pure coastal sounds. Tumaco is the Pacific.

### How to get there

Flights from Cali or Bogotá every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Average flight time between the nation's capital and the municipality of Tumaco is approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes. There is a highway in good condition from Pasto (5-hour drive).

Along this highway grows thick vegetation and several waterfalls can be observed from your vehicle. The maritime entry to Tumaco is from the

port of Buenaventura, with a stop in Guapi, Cauca. The trip takes about 8 hours.

### Whale watching tips

Whale watching in Tumaco is possible only from the open sea and with the help of services provided by hotels and tour operators. Whales cannot be seen from the beaches or the village docks. This activity takes place on the Bocagrande beaches or in boats that set off at 5:00 a.m.

### Observatories and tourist attractions

#### Morro beaches

The place gets its name from a large rocky outcrop in the middle of the sea a few meters off the coast. These beaches get frequent visitors who come to enjoy Tumaco's cultural offerings and a variety of

nautical activities. In the joyful atmosphere created by the people of Tumaco, travelers can choose from a number of lodging, gastronomical and recreational alternatives. Beaches are a 15-minute taxi ride from downtown Tumaco.

#### Bocagrande island

It is the main whale watching site in Tumaco. This peaceful setting was faithfully described in the famous bolero "Noches de Bocagrande" by local composer Faustino Arias. The natural setting and tranquility of Bocagrande beaches make them a great place for good, clean family fun and unforgettable romantic encounters. All these choices, together with whale watching opportunities, make Tumaco an essential destination. There are also a number of hotels and hostels on Bocagrande island located 15 minutes from the port of Tumaco.



El Morro, Tumaco



Sunset in Tumaco

### Mangrove trails

Boating past Bocagrande Island, one soon comes to a buoyant nature reserve of estuaries and mangrove trees forming a tunnel through which the sun's rays occasionally filter. Those traveling by boat will do well to remain silent for several minutes and contemplate the majesty of this place.

### Lodging

Everything from kiosks for hanging hammocks to hotels and hostels of different categories can be found in the village and on Morro and Bocagrande beaches.

### Food

Culinary experts who have visited Tumaco have rated the seafood among

the best anywhere on the Pacific coast. Using fish, shellfish and coconut as the main ingredients, people in Tumaco create typical regional dishes like piangua ceviche, seafood soups and coconut shrimp and crab.

### Crafts

Artisans in Tumaco work with wood and natural fibers but they are best known for their gold work and the delicate filigree they create for chains, bracelets and rings, to name only a few of the accessories popular among tourists. The goldsmiths' inventiveness and the purity of the gold they use account for this popularity.

## Guapi and Gorgona Natural Park Cauca



Guapi is located on the Pacific coast in the bay of the same name. It is one of the Cauca department's major ports and the place to catch a boat to one of Colombia's most fascinating nature reserves: the Gorgona National Nature Park with its abundant land and aquatic flora and fauna, which has made this destination a favorite among nature-loving researchers and tourists.

Gorgona is part of the Guapi township, making it the only place in the Cauca department where humpback whales can be observed during pre-scheduled land outings or in fortuitous encounters from a boat. With the nearby principal attraction of Gorgona National Nature Park, the municipality of Guapi is itself a busy port enjoying constant commerce between fishermen and farmers in the area.

### How to get there

The municipality of Guapi can be accessed by plane from Cali and from Bogotá and other Colombia cities using connecting flights through this city. It can be reached by sea from the ports of Buenaventura (Valle del Cauca) and Tumaco (Nariño). The Gorgona National Nature Park can be reached by boats





leaving from the port of Guapi. The 90-minute trip covers the 46 kilometers separating the nature reserve from the Cauca coastline. Or, you can travel in a coastal marine transport vessel from Buenaventura that takes about 10-12 hours and leaves every Friday night. There are days when several of these vessels will make the trip.

### Whale watching tips

There are no whale watching activities as such in the Gorgona National Nature Park, nor programmed outings for this purpose, since the island observes the prescribed National Parks policy of neither following nor disturbing whales in the nation's protected areas. The

only possibility a visitor has to view the humpbacks in Gorgona is from the beach or accidentally, while taking a boat trip around the island, an outing offered by park administrators to introduce visitors to the most interesting sites in the area.

According to current legislation and technical reports SUT 00022 and SUT 00364 issued in 2009 by UAESPNN (the Special National Nature Park System Office), whale watching in Gorgona is only permitted when whales are accidentally encountered, in which case observation is limited to 30 minutes and only under strict observance of DIMAR recommendations regarding navigation in the presence of these mammals.

### Gorgona National Nature Park

Declared a protected area in 1984, the park covers 61,687 hectares, including land and sea territories, which functioned for over 20 years as a sinister prison that now lies in ruins. The island is a natural paradise with long, deserted beaches and, because of the Pacific Ocean's incredible bio-diversity, unbeatable scuba diving opportunities.

Because of the area's potential for scientific research, the park is known as science island. It is part of the Gorgona Island and the Gorgonilla township and the village of Guapi 46 kilometers away. But the island's closest continental location is the hamlet of Bazán 35 kilometers away.

Inside the park there are ecological paths that can be visited with specialized guides. Aside from the great variety of flora, different animal species can also be seen during expeditions including the American swallow-tail kite, hummingbirds, kestrels, kingbirds and the blue anole. The latter, a brightly-colored endemic lizard, can be seen climbing the trunks of trees.

Gorgona beaches include Pizarro, Bonita, Blanca, Palmeras and La Camaronera, through which approximately 10 of the island's crystal clear creeks flow into the sea. Humpback whales can be spotted from any of these beaches or from the local watch tower; it is an amazing spectacle for anyone lucky enough to observe it.

On the other side of the island the favorite and most common tourist activity among visitors to Gorgona is scuba diving. The ocean waters and other advantages there offer divers a chance to see turtles, schools of fish, several kinds of sharks and expansive reefs. Las Montañitas, La Tiburonera and El Remanso are just a few of the best places to dive; 381 species of fish have been identified in the waters around Gorgona and the coral formations have been classified as the largest and best preserved in the Colombian Pacific.

### Lodging

The National Office of Parks granted a concession for a hotel inside the park where tourists stay in small houses, rooms or a beach house.

### Food

As in the rest of the Pacific region, the main staple in Guapi and the Gorgona National Nature Park is seafood. Among the most typical dishes are the crab soup, rabbit broth, freshwater crab in the shell and clams and rice. These meals are accompanied with cassava and yucca and desserts made from local fruits.

### Crafts

The Afro-Colombian population of Guapi has been heavily influenced by the indigenous communities of the Cauca department. This can be seen in their crafts, many woven from tetera straw.

**Tourism service providers for whale watching in the Colombian Pacific coast**

**Nuquí  
Travel operator**

- Operadora de Turismo Mano Cambiada.  
Tel. (4) 6836550 / (1) 3403565 ext. 107.  
Cel. 311 8727887 / 279  
corporacionmanocambiada@yahoo.es jklingez@yahoo.com

**Lodging**

- Cabaña La Joviseña.  
Tel. (4) 6836153  
Cel. 314 6838847 / 3146838856  
lugaresmagicos@gmail.com

- Cabaña Luna de Miel.  
Cel. 314 4312125 / 3116023742  
clunademiel@hotmail.com

- Cabaña Morromico.  
Tel. (8) 5214172 / (4) 5410448  
Cel. 312 7956321  
playa@morromico.com

- Cabaña Palo de Agua.  
Tel. (4) 6713438  
Cel. 314 8503897 / 314 6968834  
famobo67@hotmail.com

- Cabañas El Refugio.  
Tel. (4) 6836167  
Cel. 310 3709329 / 314 8111325

- Cabañas Mar y Río.  
Cel. 314 6569688 / 313 7459579  
elmardediego@gmail.com

- Cabañas Pijibá Lodge 2.  
Tel. (4) 4745221  
Cel. 311 7623763  
gonzatrujillo@une.net.co

- Cabañas Playa Terco.  
Tel. (4) 6836183  
cplayaterco@yahoo.es

- El Cantil.  
Tel. (4) 250707 / 3520729  
Cel. 314 7007447

elcantil@une.net.co  
elcantil@elcantil.com

- La Cabaña de Beto y Martha.  
Tel. (4) 2531320  
crispacifico@une.net.co

**Bahía Solano**

**Lodging**

- Cabaña Los Delfines.  
Playa Huina.  
Tel. (8) 5204790  
Cel. 311 3717356  
piedadelfines@hotmail.com

- Cabaña Vacacional Marlin Azul.  
Playa Potes.  
Cel. 312 2668136 / 320 6800828  
marlinazul@gmail.com -  
doelcamo@hotmail.com

- Cabañas Playa Alegre.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Tel. (4) 4511229  
Cel. 313 6674936  
info@playaalegre.com

- Eco Hotel Valle.  
Corregimiento El Valle.  
Tel. (4) 6827907  
Cel. 310 4720114  
hotelvalle@gmail.com

- Ecolodge El Almejal.  
Corregimiento El Valle playa El Almejal.  
Tel. (4) 2306060  
Cel. 320 6867177  
info@almejal.com.co/gerencia@almejal.com.co

- Ecolodge Refugio de Mr. Jerry.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Cel. 311 3401923

- Hospedajes Leticia.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Tel. (4) 6827075  
letioro@yahoo.es

- Hotel Bahía Solano.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Tel. (4) 6827048 / Cel. 314 8201446  
juanbahiasolano@hotmail.com

- Hotel Kipara.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Cel. 311 6344428

- Hotel Playa de Oro.  
Playa Huina.  
Tel. (4) 3617809  
Cel. 313 6518457  
info@hotelesdecostaacosta.com

- Posada del Mar.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Tel. (2) 6827415  
Cel. 314 6306723  
posadadelmarbahiasolano@yahoo.es

- Posada Frente al Mar.  
Playa Potes.  
Cel. 314 8474240

- Posada Punta Roca.  
Corregimiento El Valle.  
Tel. (4) 6827906  
Cel. 314 8196786  
bettyrivca@hotmail.com

- Posada Rocas de Cabo Marzo.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Tel. (4) 6827525  
Cel. 313 6814001  
bahiatebada@hotmail.com

- Posada Turística Brisas del Mar.  
Playa Huina.  
Tel. (4) 2695150  
Cel. 313 6492041

- Posada Turística El Marañón.  
Playa Mecana.  
Tel. (4) 6827301 / (8) 5214134  
Cel. 314 7607551  
posadaelmarañondebahiasolano@yahoo.es

- Posada Turística El Nativo.  
Corregimiento El Valle.  
Cel. 311 6391015  
nativo68@hotmail.com

- Posada Turística El Negro.  
Playa Huina.  
Cel. 311 7335012  
posadaelnegrobahiasolano@yahoo.com

- Posada Turística El Oquendo.  
Ciudad Mutis.  
Cel. 313 6984267 / 312 3385838  
posadaoquendobahiasolano@yahoo.es

- Posada Villa Maga.  
Corregimiento El Valle.  
Cel. 320 7774767 / 321 7729074  
magapacifico@yahoo.com.mx

**Buenaventura  
Travel operator**

- Agencia de Viajes Operadora Econatours.  
Corregimiento Ladrilleros.  
Cel. 314 7144833  
econatours@hotmail.com

**Tourism office**

- Asoturpacifico.  
Bajada principal playa Ladrilleros.  
Tel. (2) 2460285  
presidencia@asoturpacifico.com

**Travel agents**

- Agencia de Viajes Islamar Ltda.  
Cl. 8 No. 3 - 86.  
Tel. (2) 2424518  
agenciadeviajesislamar@hotmail.com

- Balboa Viajes y Turismo Ltda.  
Cl. 1 No. 2 A 39  
Tel. 2418009  
balboa@telesat.com.co

- Buenaventura Tour.  
Cra. 3 No. 3 A 26 of. 301.  
Tel. (2) 2416776  
buenaventuratours@hotmail.com

**Lodging**

- Bahía del Sol Hotel.  
Calle Bonita Ladrilleros.  
Tel. (2) 6649720  
bahiaelsolhotel@bahiaelsolladrilleros.com

- Cabañas Yullethsy.  
Ladrilleros.



☎ (2) 2460234  
napolipalmira@hotmail.com

- **Centro Turístico Edburi.**  
Playa Blanca corregimiento Bahía de Málaga.

☎ (2) 2419712  
turismoedeburi@hotmail.com

- **Flota Hotel Gloria Lizeth.**  
Corregimiento Ladrilleros.  
☎ (2) 8880393  
hotelglorializeth@hotmail.com

- **Hotel Cabañas El Edén.**  
Calle Villa Linda Ladrilleros.  
☎ (2) 2460256  
hggv1982@yahoo.com

- **Hotel Estación.**  
Cl. 2 No. 1 A 08  
☎ (2) 2434070  
albal.zapata@hotelesestelar.com

- **Hotel Magüipi.**  
Vereda San Pedro.  
☎ (2) 2400843  
Cel. 311 3896223  
hotelmaguipibuenaventura@hotmail.com

- **Ozono Hoteles.**  
Ladrilleros sector Villa Linda  
☎ (2) 5579012  
Cel. 313 6445355 / 300 4531921  
ozonohoteles@hotmail.com  
sergibeta@hotmail.com

- **Pacific Blue Hoteles.**  
Calle Bonita Pos 19 No. 50 – 21  
☎ 6676521  
pacificblue@hotmail.com

- **Papagayos Beach Hotel.**  
Calle Bonita Ladrilleros.  
☎ (2) 2460305  
papagayosbeach-hotel@hotmail.com

- **Recreativos Hotel El Almejal.**  
☎ (2) 2366939  
marceliano-62@hotmail.com

- **Reserva Aguamarina Cabañas.**  
Ladrilleros.

☎ (2) 2460285  
Cel. 313 7506430 / 311 7283213  
jota@reservaaguamarina.com

## Guapi

In keeping with National Parks Office regulations, the Gorgona concession that administers the Gorgona National Park does not offer whale watching programs as such, but it is possible to run across whales while navigating around the island, one of the services they do offer.

## Lodging

- **Concesión Gorgona.**  
**Parque Nacional Natural Gorgona.**  
☎ (2) 6645050 / 8400871  
leonariza@parquegorgona.com.co

## Tumaco

## Lodging

- **Hotel Isla de Bocagrande.**  
**Las Lillianas.**  
Isla de Bocagrande.  
☎ 7272108  
Cel. 315 4213016  
hotellasililianas@hotmail.com

- **Hotel La Sultana.**  
Calle Sucre.  
☎ (2) 7271547  
hotellasantanatumaco@gmail.com

- **Hotel María del Mar.**  
Isla de Bocagrande.  
☎ (2) 7276499  
hotelmariadelmar@live.com

- **Hotel Portobello.**  
Calle Mosquera Comercial La Sultana.  
☎ (2) 7273643  
hotelportobellotumaco@hotmail.com

- **Hotel Villa del Mar.**  
Barrio La Cordialidad  
☎ (2) 7272805

## Interesting facts

All the whale watching destinations in this guide are located on the Pacific Ocean and offer the infinite biodiversity of the ocean depths and thick tropical jungle vegetation. Although tourism infrastructure and conditions vary from one place to another, it is a good idea to follow a series of very useful guidelines to ensure you have a pleasant experience and, above all, contribute to the conservation of Colombia's marvelous Pacific region.

**Climate and temperature.** The Colombian Pacific is a very rainy region with average temperatures of 26 to 28° C. and a hot, humid and cloudy climate with mild, variable winds and a 5-meter difference between high and low tide. It is very important to carry rain gear.

## Recommendations

- Yellow fever and tetanus shots should be administered ten (10) days before your trip.
- Do not litter and keep trash to a minimum. Carry a plastic bag for all non biodegradable trash.
- Do not remove vegetables or animals from this region.
- Do not make noise that might disturb the peace or upset wildlife in the area.
- While in national parks, stay on clearly marked paths and remain with your authorized guides.
- Contribute to the rational use of energy and water.

**What to take.** Lightweight cotton clothing, lightweight rain gear, rubber boots, non-skid tennis shoes, sun screen, insect repellent, camera, prescription medication and first aid kit, and plastic bags to protect your equipment, money and personal documents.

## Conservation

Colombia adheres to the regulations for international trade in animal and plant species established by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

There are a number of foundations and organizations in the country dedicated to researching whales and other marine mammals. They have worked together to encourage integration of Colombian policies and guidelines with those of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which works to protect these huge marine mammals. A list of these organizations follows:

- **Fundación Yubarta.**  
☎ (2) 5568216 Cel. 311 3187101  
yubarta@emcali.net.co - fundación.  
yubarta@gmail.com Cali
- **Fundación Omacha.**  
☎ (1) 2362686 / 2187908 info@omacha.org Bogotá
- **Fundación Malpelo.**  
☎ (1) 2850700 / 2850701 info@fundacionmalpelo.org. Bogotá
- **Fundación Sentir.**  
☎ (4) 5381914 sentir@sentir.org – selva@sentir.org Medellín
- **Grupo Seguimiento Corazón Vía Satélite.**  
☎ (1) 6236709 jorgereinolds@hotmail.com Bogotá
- **Grupo de Investigación Ecología Animal de la Universidad del Valle.**  
☎ (2) 3212100 ext. 2570 isabel\_c\_avila@yahoo.com Cali
- **Fundación Macuáticos de Colombia.**  
☎ (4) 3417501 Cel. 301 7857629 macuaticoscolombia@gmail.com Medellín
- **Fundación IASSOS.**  
Cel. 310 8072264  
aluribe69@yahoo.com Bogotá
- **Laboratorio de Ecología Molecular de Vertebrados Acuáticos Lemva, Universidad de los Andes.**  
☎ (1) 3394949 ext. 3759  
susicaballero@hotmail.com Bogotá
- **Alianza Colombiana por las Ballenas.**  
www.colombianaporlasballenas.org

Colombian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism  
Vice Ministry of Tourism  
Office of Sustainable Tourism Quality and Development  
Office of Sectorial Analysis and Promotion

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