

Press Coverage 2020: Casa San Agustín

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Billionaires' wives club
Meet the matchmaker to the super-rich
WEEKEND

Eat!
Easy brunch guide
MAGAZINE

Emergency laws to help fight against coronavirus
First British death as fears grow over contagion

Chris Smyth Whitehall Editor
Francis Elliott Political Editor

Britain moved on to a coronavirus war footing last night as a man in Surrey became the first person to contract the disease within the country.

Chris Whitty, chief medical officer for England, said a case had been confirmed in a patient who had not left the country recently. "The virus was passed on in the UK," he said. "It is not yet clear whether they contracted it directly or indirectly from an individual who had recently returned from abroad."

The total diagnosed in the UK rose to 20, with the first case in Wales and at least one in Surrey.

In Japan a British man in his seventies who lived abroad became the first UK citizen to die from covid-19. He had been taken to hospital after catching the virus on the Diamond Princess cruise ship.

Downing Street fears that the economic fallout of a severe outbreak could be on the scale of the 2008 financial crisis after global stock markets endured their worst week since the crash. About £210 billion has been wiped off the value of Britain's biggest companies this week.

Emergency legislation to give schools, councils and the rest of the public sector powers to suspend laws, including health and safety measures, to cope with a pandemic will be introduced next week. Teachers and nursery workers will be allowed to have bigger class sizes in cases of widespread staff absences. Boris Johnson took charge of government preparations yesterday after criticism of a slow response to the crisis. He is expected to take a more hands-on role. Ministers and officials are considering the trade-off between allowing an acute outbreak, from which the economy would rebound more quickly, and trying to save more lives by imposing restrictions on mass gatherings and transport.

The government action came as:

- Eight more countries reported the first cases of the virus as it spread from Italy, taking the total affected to nearly 60.
- The World Health Organisation (WHO) warned that there was a "very high" risk of global spread with few countries unaffected.
- Mark Carney, the outgoing governor of the Bank of England, warned that Britain should prepare for an economic hit as Chinese manufacturing and tourism dropped off.
- Schools were told that summer exams faced disruption while more companies imposed travel restrictions and told staff to work from home.
- The NHS began to ration hospitals' orders of protective equipment and face masks to prevent shortages.

Alison Barnett, centre director for

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Javid reveals plan for income tax cut

Francis Elliott, Rachel Sylvester
Alice Thomson

Sajid Javid wanted to cut 2p from the basic rate of income tax in the budget he was due to announce, the former chancellor has revealed.

Mr Javid was also pressing to reduce stamp duty and to offer generous reliefs for capital investment in a radical tax-cutting programme to have been unveiled next month.

He resigned from the government two weeks ago after a dispute with Boris Johnson in the middle of the reshuffle. In an interview with The Times, Mr Javid, 50, said that he had wanted to send a "huge signal for working people" that the government was "absolutely on their side" with a series of aggressive cuts, including the first to the basic rate of income tax for 15 years.

He intended to reduce the basic rate from 20p to 19p in the pound from April and to set an ambition to cut it to 15p by the end of the parliament.

The cost of a 2p reduction would be £10 billion a year, the government estimates. Of the 31 million taxpayers, 26 million pay only the basic rate levied on income between £12,501 and £50,000. The tax cut would have been worth up to £750 a year, with those in the higher tax rates benefiting the most.

The former chancellor said that he did not know which — if any — of his proposals remain under consideration by his successor, Rishi Sunak. The budget is on March 11.

His intervention is a direct challenge to Mr Johnson and Mr Sunak to prioritise tax cuts that he believes are in the national interest. Mr Sunak faces either being seen to ditch his predecessor's

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Spreading the word The climate campaigner Greta Thunberg joined schoolchildren at a protest in Bristol yesterday. Page 11

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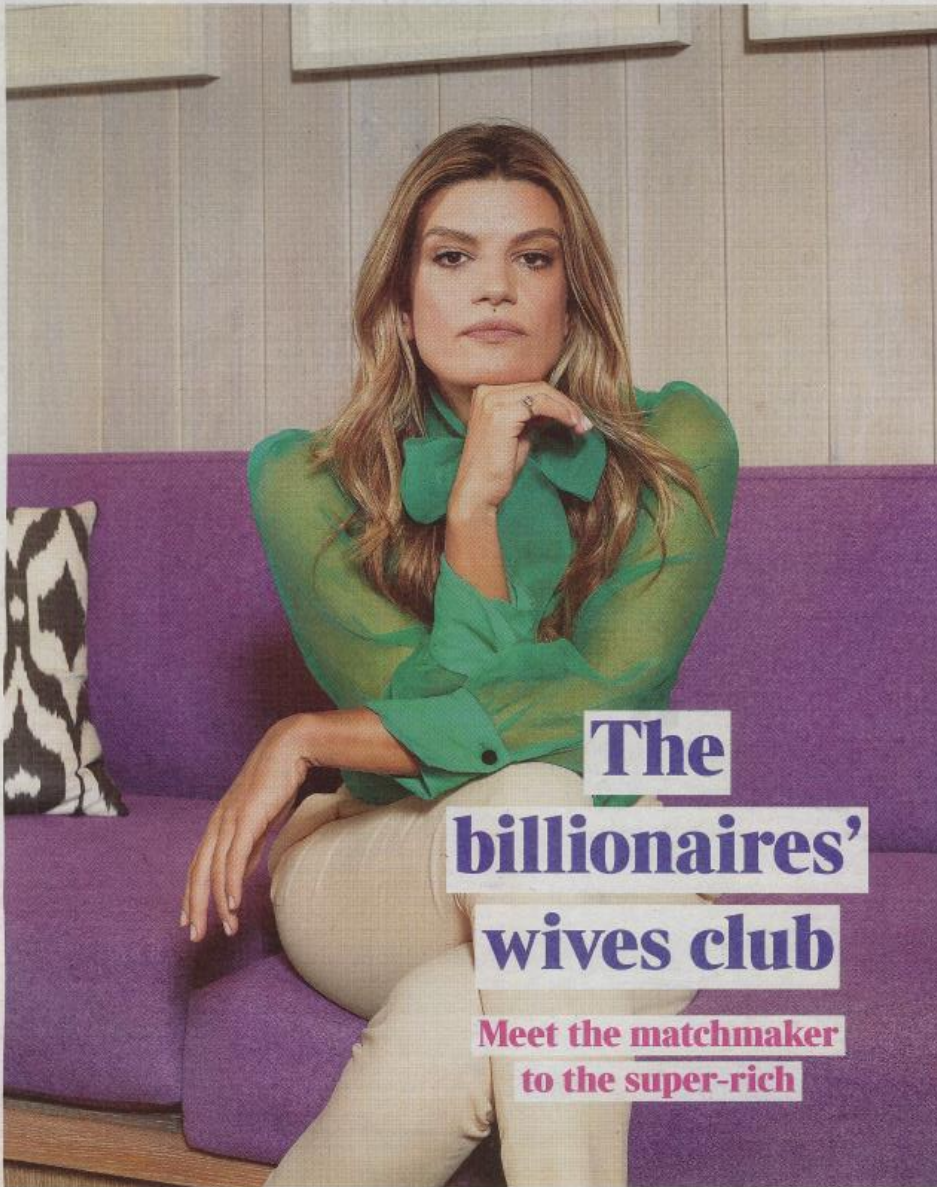
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Best places to eat 30 top spots for a curry
Plus the chefs' favourite Indian restaurants

Weekend

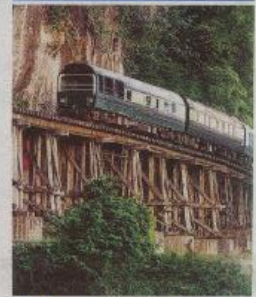
Travel
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page 29



The billionaires' wives club

**Meet the matchmaker
to the super-rich**

**Great train
adventures**



A luxurious ride
through Thailand



A South African
safari by rail



A flight-free trip
to the Netherlands

40 Travel South America

Luxury travel



Cowboys and beach clubs in Colombia

Monique Rivalland goes horse riding in a remote new eco-camp and relaxes on Cartagena's glamorous Caribbean coast

The chief cowboy, Seco, is asking me which bull I would like to buy. At least I think he is. I am astride a horse in a corral and I can't really hear over the din of the mooing. I naively point at one with horns and the cowboys laugh. "Los cojones!" Seco cries. Balls. Look for the balls.

I may not be a bona fide cowgirl (yet), but I am beginning to feel like one — especially in my felt hat and horsehair ribbon, which flutters in the wind as I trot.

This is life on Guanapalo nature reserve, a mighty savannah in Colombia's unexplored northeast. It's where you'll find los llaneros, the cattle herders of Colombia's lowlands, and a new luxury eco-camp called CoroCorá. This is the region's first exposure to tourism and it's also a conservation project, which is why the cowboys have welcomed the initiative on to their land.

This is the first stop on my ten-day tour of Colombia, which will take me more than 1,000km, from the capital of Bogotá to the Caribbean coast. Upscale travel is a relatively new concept here. Civil war, the brutal cocaine trade and guerrilla kidnappings deterred many visitors for more than 50 years. A Colombian friend of mine said she couldn't imagine how the country would "do luxury". But in these more peaceful days there are chic new places popping up all over the place alongside experiences that can't be replicated elsewhere.

CoroCorá is not so much about glamour and ease, but about the extraordinary — and exclusive — cultural experience.

It's a one-hour flight from Bogotá to Yopal, where I am met by a guide. Then it's a two-and-a-half-hour jerk east on a bumpy dirt track into the heart of the savannah, where, eventually, five large

canvas tents appear on the horizon. While they are unremarkable on the outside, so as not to blot the landscape, inside the decor is classic safari-luxe, but with a Latino twist — net-draped beds with brightly embroidered cushions and Acapulco chairs on the deck. In the bathroom are plant-based toiletries and bug spray. There's a maximum of eight guests at the camp, plus six staff — and, of course, the cowboys, who ride in from their ranch at dawn.

Its dual raisons d'être mean that it's first a conservation project that studies and protects the traditions and wildlife of the area (pumas, ocelots, caimans, giant anteaters, armadillos, porcupines and myriad bird species) and second a tourist experience that provides income for the herders. Alexis, the young Frenchman who came up with the concept, tells me that if they had to pack up the camp tomorrow, they could do so without leaving a trace.

Taking in this vast grassland, stretching 500km east into western Venezuela and south until the Amazon, is easy at a gallop. Most of the year the region is water plains, but I'm here in the dry season (which tends to last from December to March) and the mid-morning sun is bouncing off the knoll crests. Scarlet ibis wading birds (the "corocoras" after which the camp is named) perch at a pond's edge and we whizz past hundreds of capybaras, which look like gigantic guinea pigs and are the largest rodents on the planet.

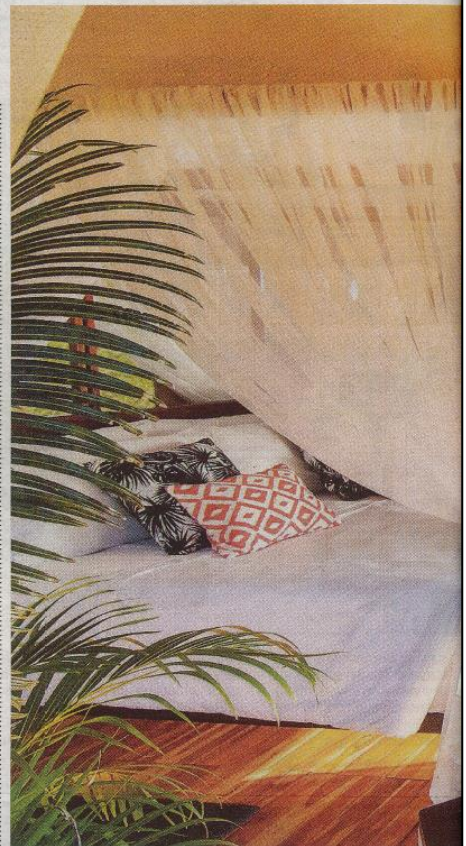
Buzzing with adrenaline, we are welcomed back by Alejandro, whom I suppose you would call a maitre d', although that feels a little grand for a man outside a tent, even if he is proffering a plate of cold towels (it's 33°C). Over two days we try local dishes such as avocado with chicharrón (pork belly), yucca (like cassava or yam) gncchi in creole sauce, and wild river fish with chimichurri. Dessert, a bowl of iced guanabana (a tropical fruit something like

a pear crossed with a banana), is delicious. In the evenings, after a guided afternoon ramble that finishes at last light, guests sit around a campfire with an aperitivo and watch the stars prick the sky. If you're lucky, one of the cowboys' daughter's will sing folk songs.

At night, once you've stumbled back to your tent in the dark, dodging giant guinea pigs, the resident bird and lizard orchestra begins. There's a walkie-talkie for calling Alejandro if you have any unexpected visitors. When we mention seeing a mouse he's mortified but only because it could attract a snake. (Tents for two cost £483 a night, corocoracamp.com.)

After this jaunt in the wild, returning to Bogotá — not a pretty city — is quite a shock. It's at a much higher altitude, so it's cold; the freight traffic is dense and the city is cloaked in smog. But it's the gateway to almost everywhere else in Colombia. You can fly to Medellín, but we drove for ten hours across the magnificent Andes through the coffee-growing region, stopping at pretty mountain towns along the way, including Salento, with its small but beautifully preserved old town and surrounding hiking trails. One of the best is a four-hour, mid-level walk through the Cocora Valley to see the tallest palm trees on earth.

In Medellín most people stay in the affluent, jungle-fringed neighbourhood of El Poblado, where the streets resemble an east London plant shop — walls of cheese plants and rubber plants and birds of paradise. It feels lush and rich, and it is: those with money in Medellín have serious money. It was here that Pablo Escobar reigned supreme for the latter decades of the 20th century. That in turn has attracted tourists, many lured by the Netflix show *Narcos*, which tells the



story of the drug kingpin who fed billions into the city and was viewed as something of a (violent) Robin Hood. The result is that in Medellín, more than in any other Colombian city, you find plenty of chichi hotels, cocktail bars and restaurants.

We stay at inexpensive Celestino, with its rooftop hot tub and Soho House feel (balcony rooms from £106, hotelcelestino.com). It's right in the El Poblado mix, a five-minute walk from Moshí, the new Asian-Colombian fine-dining restaurant from the people behind Carmen, another of the city's fine-dining experiences (£60 for a tasting menu, moshimedellin.co). Eating well can be a challenge in Colombia, so take your chance. The hotel is near El Poblado's salsa clubs, which are loud until late at weekends. But they give the neighbourhood a sense of Colombian spirit, which is welcome in what could otherwise become a homogenised hipster town.

Our next destination, a one-hour flight

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Travel 41

3 more cool places to stay in Colombia

Casa del Presidente

Live it up in presidential style in the former home of one of Colombia's most celebrated presidents. Belisario Betancur, who died in 2018, is remembered for his efforts to end guerrilla warfare and bring peace to Colombia. His palatial 18th-century villa, now a sumptuous five-bedroom boutique hotel, is a landmark in the well-preserved old artists' town of Barichara in the northern department of Santander. It's remote — you'll need to fly to Bucaramanga and from there it's a three-and-a-half-hour drive or a 20-minute helicopter ride. But it's worth the effort. Impressive Chicamocha Canyon is easily accessible en route and you can spend days exploring on foot, by bike or by raft. Back at base there's a pool and pretty gardens, and from the bedroom balconies guests have views over the Andes and of Barichara's cobbled streets and terracotta rooftops.

Details Doubles from £752 (casadelpresidente.com.co)

Cannua Lodge

This new eco-lodge in the Antioquian mountains is just over an hour's drive east of Medellín. Guests stay in modern brick cabanas with floor-to-ceiling windows. Some have private gardens, others have decks, but all of them have spectacular vistas of the San Nicolás valley. The deluxe option has two storeys and can sleep a family of four. The emphasis at Cannua is on permaculture and learning about it in the lap of (sustainable) luxury. There are walks and tours that will teach you about the abundant biodiversity of the region — there are more than 90 bird species at Cannua — as well as excursions to local fincas (country houses). The retreat also has a spa and a smart restaurant serving organic Colombian food with an Asian and European twist.

Details Cabanas for two from £193 (cannua.com)

The Artisan DC Hotel

This urban hotel from the Autograph Collection is a cool retreat from the chaos of Bogotá, in the central, financial district of Chapinero. Large picture windows supply a sense of the downtown buzz without you having to be in the thick of it. The bedrooms are bright and a marriage of modern and vintage flair, with touches such as brightly coloured pendant lamps and old speakers; they also feature sleek marble bathrooms. Exposed brick walls are decorated with modern art. Tempting weathered leather sofas fill the lobby, but you'll probably want to settle into the Cooper Lounge's inventive cocktail menu. There's a speakeasy bar as well as Asian-Colombian fusion food at the hotel's Osaka restaurant.

Details Doubles from £163 (autograph-hotels.marriott.com)



from Medellín, is Cartagena on Colombia's Caribbean coast. An easy walk from the waterfront, our hotel Casa San Agustín is three 17th-century Andalusian-style mansions with a courtyard, arched galleries and a section of an ancient aqueduct straddling the swimming pool. Just beyond the palm-filled patio is Alma, the hotel's smart restaurant, where the executive chef Heberto Eljach serves his signature seafood casserole. Inside the regal rooms which have lofty wooden-clad ceilings everything is oversized: the bathroom, the wardrobe, the windows, the balcony overlooking the city rooftops (doubles from £420, hotelcasasanagustin.com).

Within the city walls, Cartagena — a significant port and fort on the transatlantic slave route — is technicolour. Walk down any street in the historic centre and you'll be dazzled by its exotic palette of pink bougainvillea, mint green houses and blue skies. The crowds, however, can be so dense that, once you've had a stroll, swung by the Castillo de San Felipe hilltop fort and eaten some delicious ceviche outside

Main picture: CoroCorá eco-camp. Above, from left: Casa San Agustín, Celestino hotel, Blue Apple Beach House

Need to know

Monique Rivalland was a guest of all the hotels mentioned. Jacada Travel offers eight nights in Colombia with two each at Cora Cora Camp, Hotel Celestino, Casa San Agustín and Hotel Las Islas plus flights from £5,900pp (jacadatravel.com)

at La Cevichería, you might want to escape — and you can for an afternoon or longer.

Much of Cartagena's appeal stems from its proximity to the Caribbean tropics. The Rosario Islands and Barú peninsula are less than a two-hour boat trip away. And now you don't have to make do with dreary island resorts. There's upmarket Blue Apple Beach House on nearby Tierra Bomba island and five-star Las Islas, which opened on Barú peninsula, southwest of the city, 18 months ago.

A private speedboat will deliver you to Blue Apple in 20 minutes and you'll find the city's fashionable crowd here looking fabulous. It has a handful of cabanas if you want to stay the night, but it's really all about the day parties. Cocktails in coconuts and plates of sea bass carpaccio flow steadily from the kitchen to poolside loungers. In the background are Balearic beats and sun-worshippers paddleboarding on the water. It's only about £8 for a double day bed and the same for a plate of carpaccio (blueapplebeach.com).

The ritzy resort of Las Islas offers the full

five-star experience: guests are collected from Cartagena port and the 45-minute boat trip there ends with a gentle cruise through the hotel's private mangroves. Golf buggies trundle between their 54 stilted bungalows, thatched roofs hidden high in the treetops. Each has a deck overlooking the bay and beyond, and a pair of bicycles are parked at the bottom of the stairs (treetop bungalows from £470 for two, lasislas.com.co).

You can dip into all the classic resort activities — snorkelling, boat trips, lazing at the beach club over pina colodas — but it's most fun to people-watch. It's a beautiful place, idyllic even. Yet there's an over-zealousness to please. Plates are cleared before you've finished, and wine is topped up at three-minute intervals. You can't even take a yoghurt from the breakfast buffet without someone offering to carry it for you. The staff are so warm and charming, though, it's easy to forgive Colombia for not being as polished as other luxury veterans, such as St Tropez. Besides, that might just be part of its allure.

40 Travel South America

Luxury travel



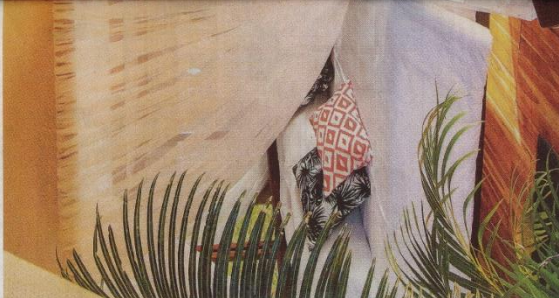
Cowboys and beach clubs in Colombia

Monique Rivalland goes horse riding in a remote new eco-camp and relaxes on Cartagena's glamorous Caribbean coast

The chief cowboy, Srco, is a young man with a mustache, wearing a cowboy hat and a light-colored shirt. He is riding a white horse and looking towards the camera. In the background, other people are riding horses along a beach. The scene is set in a remote area with a clear sky and a calm sea.

It's a beautiful day in the heart of the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The sun is shining brightly, and the sea is a deep blue. A group of people are riding horses along the beach, enjoying the warm weather and the beautiful scenery. The horses are galloping along, and the riders are laughing and shouting. It's a truly unforgettable experience.

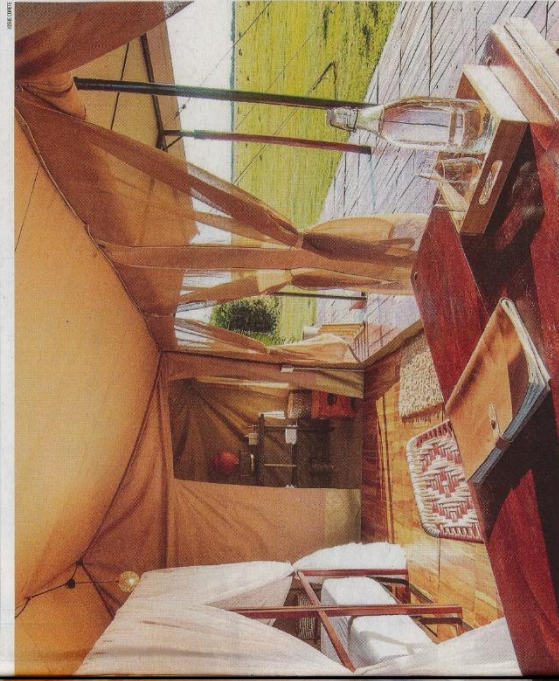
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story of the drug kingpin who fled billions into the city and was viewed as something of a (voluntary) Robin Hood. The result is a city where the rich and the poor live side by side. In the heart of the city, you'll find the most luxurious hotels and restaurants, while just a short distance away, you'll find the most basic of shacks and shacks.

On the beach, the sun is shining brightly, and the sea is a deep blue. A group of people are riding horses along the beach, enjoying the warm weather and the beautiful scenery. The horses are galloping along, and the riders are laughing and shouting. It's a truly unforgettable experience.

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Caribbean coast. An easy walk from the waterfront, our hotel, Casa San Agustin, is three 17th-century Andalusian-style mansions with a courtyard, arched galleries and a section of an ancient aqueduct straddling the swimming pool. Just beyond the palm-filled patio is Alma, the hotel's smart restaurant, where the executive chef Heberto Eljach serves his signature seafood casserole. Inside the regal rooms, which have lofty wooden-clad ceilings, everything is oversized: the bathroom, the wardrobe, the windows, the balcony overlooking the city rooftops (doubles from £420, hotelcasasanagustin.com).

