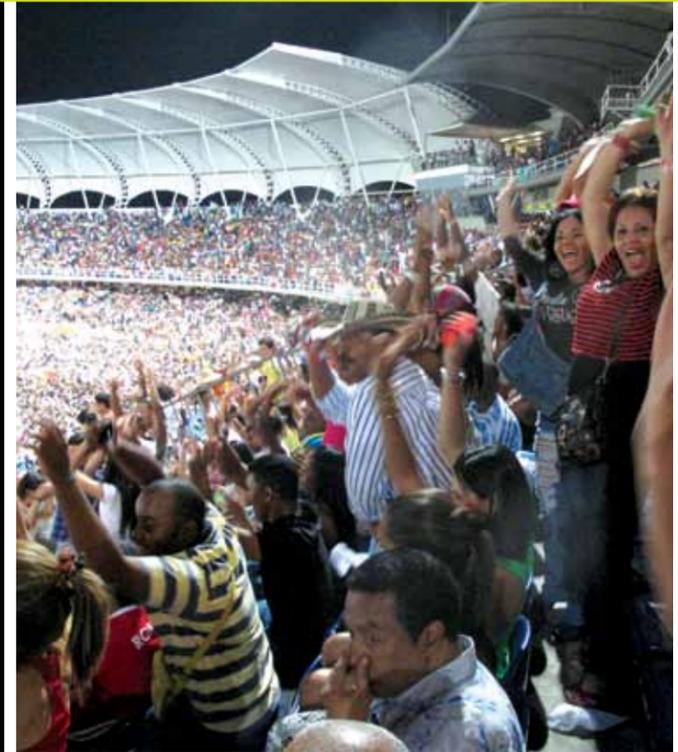




INFORMATION

- The festival takes place in the city of Santiago de Cali, located in the south-west of Colombia, in its Pacific coastal region.
- Cali is the third largest city in the country with a population of 2.5 million.
- Over the course of four days, 50,000 people attend the festival, which has become a byword for Afro-Colombian culture, with over 60 groups from all over the country meeting to compete and share their regional styles.



"Rumba, rumba, rumba!" The festival takes place in a football stadium in Cali and is a four-day dancer's paradise

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

PETRONIO ALVAREZ

COLOMBIA

William Lloyd-George immerses himself into a festival celebrating and promoting the country's Afro-Colombian community and its music

Locals will warn you that the Petronio Álvarez festival is one of the wildest in the world. It only takes a few minutes inside Cali's football stadium, to understand the true depth of their advice. "Rumba, rumba, rumba," the crowd screams, rammed together on the makeshift dance floor. Pumping salsa beats, wide smiles, and a welcoming atmosphere. This is Afro-Colombia.

While Colombia has slowly been edging its way back onto the tourist map, only a tiny chunk of the country actually receives foreign visitors. Leave the comfort zone of the top destinations, and there's large swathes of unexplored land. I chose to visit one of the most unvisited, yet unmissable regions in Colombia – the Pacific Coast, which is largely populated by Afro-

Colombian communities.

The Petronio Álvarez, the world's largest Afro-Latino festival, is a great way to begin a trip to the Pacific region and learn about the rich culture and history of this forgotten land. Every year, over 50,000 Colombians descend on Cali to enjoy a weekend of some of the best Afro-Latin music South America has to offer.

The four-day festival invites over 60 groups from across the country to come and compete for awards given to the best bands. Many are from some of the poorest, most neglected and isolated regions in Colombia. With few other major events promoting Afro-Colombian music, the festival has become increasingly important for preserving and promoting the somewhat endangered culture.

Tightly squeezed in the gyrating crowd, right at the front of the stage, the energy is infectious. Groups dance in unison, with 'leaders' at the front dictating everyone's next dance moves. Many wearing straw hats, they wave white handkerchiefs in the air. People share bottles of the local brew, Viche, and sing along to their favourite songs. Fifty thousand people attended this year, compared with just 4,000 four years ago.

Amid the chaos, calmly stands Noency Mosquera Martínez. Dressed in a long multicoloured dress, adorned with symbols of Africa, she oozes pride for her origin and culture. "Without this festival Afro-Colombians would be forgotten by the world," she says, smiling, as sweat drips off her forehead, accumulated during hours of dancing.

In 2002, Martínez's hometown suffered a massacre when paramilitaries took control of the town and the FARC, left-wing guerrillas, began to fire rockets indiscriminately. One hit the church where hundreds of civilians were hiding. One hundred and nineteen civilians were killed, 98 injured. "The whole town fled straight away, many moved to local cities, we lost everything over night," Martínez tells me.

Together with her band, Bongo de Bojayá, Martínez travelled for over two days by boat to reach the festival and compete for the awards. "We came to the festival because we want to tell the world about what happened in our town," says Martínez, whose lyrics tell the story of the

massacre. "We also want to encourage all Afro-Colombian communities to protect their land and culture."

Afro-Colombian communities are some of the most susceptible to displacement in Colombia. Their traditional homelands are often located in remote mountainous regions, which act as ideal hiding places for armed groups fighting over natural resources and drug-trafficking routes. The massive displacement numbers have worried Afro-Colombian leaders who fear they are losing their traditional culture.

According to Juana Álvarez, an organiser and daughter of composer Petronio Álvarez, the first nationally recognised Afro-Colombian musician, whom the festival is named after, the purpose of the festival is to protect Afro-Colombian culture. "Our people had their culture taken away from them for so long, now we want to get it back."

Throughout the first evening, various people suggest I join them at the 'Street of Sin' when the festival closes for the night. As the final band finish, and the crowds start to shuffle out, strangers quickly begin to make plans for me to visit this mysterious place.

It is hard to really prepare yourself for the 'Street of Sin'. Think Notting Hill meets Rio and then turn it up a notch. It is a long street full of huge speakers booming heavy reggaeton, salsa, and modern Afro-Colombian music. All the energy accumulated at the festival explodes here.

As a city, Cali has very little in the way of tourist attractions, but those who do venture down here normally end up staying longer than expected. The warmth

"It would be easy for our style of music to die out but the festival keeps it alive"

and friendliness of the people is one of the first trappings for any visitor hoping to briefly skip through. And with some of the best salsa parties in Colombia, visitors may quickly become nocturnal.

During the day one can take a tour of the artisan market, which has products from throughout the region. To escape the heat visit the Cali river, where locals come to swim and picnic. Alongside the festival there are also conferences held during the day, in which experts, professors and musicians discuss Afro-Colombian culture. Workshops are also held teaching attendees how to make traditional instruments, and learn storytelling. "We hope this will encourage the younger generations to pass on our traditional ways," drummer Marcus Silva tells me as I make a rather poor attempt at building a drum.

While there are countless options for delicious local food around the city, saving oneself for a dinner outside the stadium is wise. Every night, dozens of stalls line up

selling traditional Afro-Colombian food, and teaching those interested how to make it. For a few pounds you can grab a large fresh fish, with fried plantains and rice.

Back at the festival, Jorge Eliecer Llanos, the lead singer of traditional band Son Del Tuno says he believes that without the festival, music from his region would never be heard. Having travelled 17 hours by boat to reach the festival, he says one of the best things is the cultural exchange with other communities he would never know about.

"We live isolated, far from anyone else, it would be easy for our style of music to die out but the festival keeps it alive," says Llanos. "We have been invited to play in Bogotá and other towns, allowing us to preserve a national interest in our particular style of music."

The closing night of the festival is by far the most rowdy. The crowds, all with their favourite bands, are somewhat tense as they wait for the judges' final decision. Every year famous bands play on the last night, to try and gain popularity for the festival. "It helps bring attention to our music," Ruth Marien the director of one competing band, Semblanzas del Río Guapi tells me. "Before the festival, Afro-Colombian music was not even played on the local radio. But the festival is slowly helping it to regain popularity and we hope people from all over the world come and see it for themselves." ■

ONLINE www.festivalpetronioalvarez.com

DATES The next edition of the festival takes place at the end of August

A FEAST OF MUSIC

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