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EDITOR: DOMINI CLARK

THE ESCAPE

COLOMBIA'S LOST CORNER

The rugged and remote El Cocuy National Park offers spectacular hiking – and history lessons

MARK SISSONS
EL COCUY NATIONAL PARK,
COLOMBIA

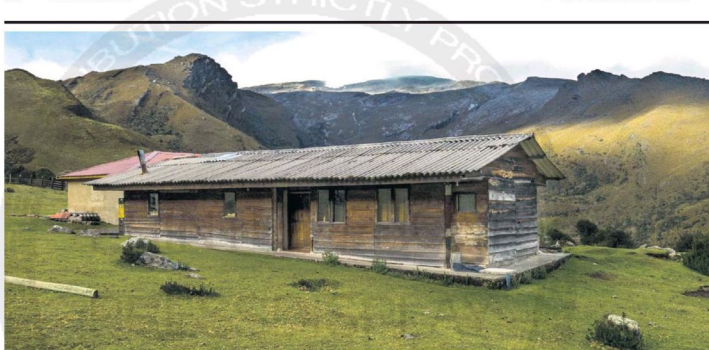
Not that long ago the guerrillas controlled these mountains," says Berthilda, wiping her brow with a sweat-soaked black leather sombrero.

Leaning on her walking stick, clad in only a thin sweater, tattered pants and rubber boots, this 54-year-old mountain lioness seems oblivious to the biting Andean winds, as my numb fingers fumble to zip up my Gore-Tex jacket.

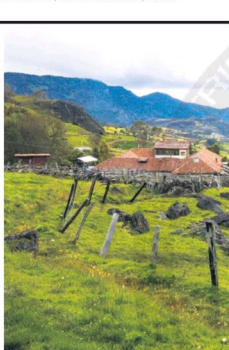
We're approaching the summit of a 4,500-metre peak in eastern Colombia's El Cocuy National Park near the Venezuelan border. In the distance, a giant granite cube called El Pulpito del Diablo (the Devil's Pulpit) sits like an alien monolith atop the snowy ridge of an even loftier mountain called Pan de Azúcar.

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Cerro de Ritacuba: One of many formidable peaks in El Cocuy. CHRISTIAN KOREZ/GETTY IMAGES



Base camp for trekking to the peaks and glaciers of El Cocuy National Park (left). Hacienda La Esperanza is a working ranch and guesthouse offering guided hikes along the edge of El Cocuy. The eerie, endan-



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Colombia: Trekking in an otherworldly landscape

“Then el Presidente’s soldiers came and defeated them,” Berthilda says, referring to hard-line Colombian president Alvaro Uribe’s decision a decade ago to dispatch an elite army battalion to drive the Marxist Ejército de Liberación Nacional guerrillas out of the western half of the park. “Only then did we feel safe.”

Today, soldiers continue to patrol these trails, thwarting kidnappings and other guerrilla terror tactics. It’s comforting news for a gringo on a long overdue journey of rediscovery.

I first came to Colombia as an exchange student in 1985, when the country was engulfed in a maelstrom of violence. Drug lord Pablo Escobar was waging a campaign of mass murder and mayhem. Backed by his funds, M-19 guerrillas stormed the Palace of Justice in downtown Bogotá, unleashing an army courier assault, and the ensuing blood-bath shocked the world.

Then, shortly after I arrived to live with *campesinos* in the mountains close to Manizales, the near-by El Nevado del Ruiz volcano erupted. The resulting mudslide buried the town of Armero, killing tens of thousands of its inhabitants and turning countless more

into refugees. I barely escaped with my life, and spent the next few months volunteering in refugee camps tending to orphaned children. Times change. Nations recover. Much of Colombia is now considered relatively safe to visit and is increasingly popular among adventurous travellers. Awaiting them are impeccably preserved colonial cities, the sensual embrace of unspoiled Caribbean beaches, the exotic lure of the Amazon, a hugely welcoming Latino culture and the austere beauty of the high Andes.

I had originally planned to return to Ruiz, trek to the crater’s rim, and reflect upon that terrible time. But the volcano became active again shortly before I arrived – perhaps still angry that I had escaped its molten wrath – and the surrounding park was declared off-limits.

So instead I headed east toward El Cocuy’s magnificent string of glaciers and snow-capped peaks interlaced with rolling grasslands and sparkling clear waterfalls and lakes.

“El Cocuy truly is the lost corner of Colombia,” says head park ranger Roberto Ariano, who oversees this remote, seldom visited region of thick Andean forest, high

alpine grasslands (called *paramos*) and perpetual snows. “This is the largest glacier mass in the world’s equatorial zone, as well as the last refuge of the indigenous U’wa people, who control half of the park,” he adds, explaining that 300,000-hectare El Cocuy’s ecosystems also protect many rare and endangered animal species.

Among them are pumas, howling monkeys, tapirs, red-footed tortoises and spectacled bears, the only surviving species of bear endemic to South America. High above it all, the iconic condor soars between white summits.

Reaching El Cocuy is not easy. The 400-kilometre journey from Bogotá over twisting, often treacherous unpaved mountain roads passes through the heart of the province of Boyacá, known as “the Land of Freedom” because of a series of battles here that secured Colombia’s independence from Spain. You can make the bone-rattling trip in 14 hours. Or stop, as I did, overnight in Villa de Leyva, a beautiful, well-preserved colonial town.

Executions once took place in Villa de Leyva’s immense Plaza Mayor, still the country’s largest town square. (Florentino Ariza,

the chronically romantic protagonist in Gabriel García Márquez’s novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, lived here.) An early morning stroll through its cobblestone streets lined with whitewashed colonial era houses, their balconies overflowing with bougainvilleas, feels like stepping onto the sets of the Spanish-language period soap operas that often shoot here. It was in towns such as Villa de Leyva, and in the fertile hills and mountains of Boyacá, that so much blood and sweat and gold poured from the “open veins of Latin America,” as Uruguayan journalist and author Eduardo Galeano called his seminal account of five centuries of European dominance over the South American continent. From the conquistadors’ pillage to Colombia’s notorious La Violencia, the decade-long (1948-58) civil war between Conservatives and Liberals, the people of this beautiful but haunted region have endured countless struggles.

Reaching Posada del Molino, a 220-year-old renovated colonial mansion in the town of El Cocuy, I came face to face with one of La Violencia’s ghosts. The woman who once owned this house controlled a Catholic paramilitary

group that rounded up protesters, burned their bibles and then detained them in a tiny, windowless room off the courtyard. (Among the persecuted was a group of Canadian missionaries imprisoned here for several days.) The woman’s sinister portrait now glares from the wall of a bedroom and haunts the hacienda still, according to Posada del Molino’s current proprietor.

Ghosts of crises past also burn in the eyes of 27-year-old Guillermo Nalderrama, my affable host at the final acclimatization stop before I enter the park. His family’s ancestral ranch, the rustic Hacienda La Esperanza (House of Hope), occupies the edge of El Cocuy.

“During La Violencia my grandparents often hid here together,” says Guillermo as we dine on bruschetta, ragu of lamb and torto de cuajada (cheese cake) in the courtyard under a twinkling canopy of constellations.

“My grandmother was a Liberal, my grandmother a Conservative, and getting caught together could have gotten them killed,” he adds, showing me a faded photo of these long dead lovers from a dangerous time.

Guillermo himself fled with



ger giant Frailejone plant lives at high altitudes (centre right). Even at 4,500 metres, Berthilda doesn't feel the biting Andean winds (far right). PHOTOS: MARK SISSONS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL



most of his family to Bogotá during the guerrilla occupation of El Cocuy. There, he studied to become a chef at a prestigious cooking school. He never dreamed he would return to La Esperanza, but as the guerrillas fled and tourism gradually began to take hold, he saw opportunity.

"I'm really happy to be back home now, meeting people from all over the world who come to this remote part of Colombia and sharing their amazing experiences," Guillermo says, pouring us each a shot of *aguardiente*. One sip of Colombia's infamous firewater takes me back nearly 30 years to rowdy nights spent drinking, carousing and dancing the *cumbia* with campesinos.

The next morning I climb high into the emerald hills with two of Guillermo's ranch hands. They have agreed to take me to the Cueva de Cuchumba, a large cave with a waterfall cascading through it. It was here in the 17th century that a Spanish priest discovered an image on a piece of cloth said to be an apparition of the Virgin Mary with the dark skin and indigenous features of the U'wa.

According to legend, the Virgin appeared to the U'wa well before

IF YOU GO

One of South America's premier hiking, trekking and mountaineering destinations, the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy contains 21 spectacular peaks, most higher than 5,000 metres. The best time for trekking in **El Cocuy National Park** is during the dry season from December to February/March. The rest of the year it's often rainy and/or snowy. Reach the park by private car. From Bogotá, it's a 12- to 14-hour drive along unpaved mountain roads.

GETTING THERE

Air Canada offers non-stop flights between Toronto and Bogotá. Flying time is approximately six hours. Return airfare starts at about \$920.

WHERE TO STAY

The only hotel in **Villa de Leyva** located in the main square is the Hotel Plaza Mayor, which offers panoramic

ic square views. Double rooms start at \$102; hotelp plazamayor.com.co

In El Cocuy, **Posada del Molino** is a renovated colonial mansion that is reputedly haunted. Rooms are decorated with fine period furnishings and the courtyard has a stream running through it. Rates vary; pablocoy11@yahoo.com

A rustic, working farmhouse, **Hacienda La Esperanza** is a family-run hotel perfectly situated for acclimatization hikes prior to trekking in El Cocuy National Park. Proprietor Guillermo Nalderama is a fabulous chef. Guides and horses are available starting from \$20 a day. *Hostel beds start at \$10; haciendalaesperanza@gmail.com*

Near Bogotá, the elegant hotel **Hacienda del Salitre** was built in 1736 and is considered one of the most important national monuments in Colombia. The for-

mer monastery that was also once the headquarters of Simon Bolívar is found two hours outside the capital on the road to El Cocuy. Double rooms start at \$295; haciendadesalitre.com

In Bogotá, the four-star **Hotel AR Salitre** is a sleek, ultramodern full-service spa hotel within walking distance of the city's major shopping centre and just 15 minutes from El Dorado International Airport. Double rooms start at \$103; hotelsar.com

RECOMMENDED OUTFITTERS

Bogotá-based Andes World Travel organizes group and individual hiking, trekking and mountaineering trips to the Colombian Andes. andesworldtravel.com

For more info, visit colombia.travel.

Mark Sissons

Spanish conquistadores arrived to convert them to Christianity. Their astonished European proselytizers promptly had the miraculous textile relocated to the church in the nearby town of Guicán, where it remains today.

Trekking on from Cueva de Cuchumba, we enter an eerie, otherworldly landscape called Valle de los Frailejones. These giant daisy-like plants, so named for their resemblance to hooded monks, flourish in the high altitude grasslands of northwestern South America. Towering over the valley's surreal, Dr. Seussian forest of giant spiky trunks sprouting huge yellow flowers and hairy leaves are the snowcapped peaks and glaciers of one of the world's best kept hiking secrets, which Berthilda is waiting to show me.

Not that long ago, my journey into this lost corner would have been virtually impossible. I am astonished and inspired thinking about how far this country has come since I was last here. Ay, Colombia! It's great to be back.

Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer travelled courtesy of the Colombian tourism board, which did not review or approve this article.