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AMERICAN AWAY

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In to the Wild
Visit a mysterious, long-forgotten city in the heart of the Colombian jungle

A group of tourists
wind their way through
jungle paths to Ciudad
Perdida.

The Land of Enchanted



In an Indiana Jones-worthy adventure, travel writer Kevin Raub embarks on a journey into the heart of the Colombian jungle to explore a city that was once lost — and is now found.

moment

*By Kevin Raub
Photographs by
Dennis Drenner*

It's not every day — certainly not any of the every days during the last two decades, anyway — that you'd find yourself wandering through a dense, sunburned Colombian jungle, but that's what I find myself doing at the moment, shoes soaked in sweat and throat parched from breathlessness. With me are a Hungarian and a Scot, a Swiss, an Englishwoman and an Australian. No, we are not hostages, though we are marching heads down, sucking air like oxygen-deprived Mongols on a relocation trek through the Gobi desert. Some of us think we can't go on, some of us are thirsty and some of us just want it to be over. But make no mistake, we are not here under duress — we have chosen to do this.

All of a sudden, there's a commotion. The Hungarian in front of me hops, skips and jumps a few feet off trail to the right. I'm next in line, but I have no idea what has happened. There's a shout, then another, then fingers point, and that's when I see it: a very tiny snake, no bigger than a standard-size ruler, resting on a boulder along the trail, mouth full of jungle rat (or some such rodent). Our guide wastes no time taking a rock to its head in an effort to incapacitate it, all while my animal-friendly group protests. "Don't kill it!" no one (and everyone) in particular shouts. "It's fine. Let's just go around it," we say. "This is a rabo amarillo, one of the most deadly snakes in the Colombian jungle. You don't want it anywhere near us alive," he informs our group matter-of-factly.

"Oh, my gosh!" says the Hungarian. "I put my hand right down on it to balance myself as I passed through the boulders." We pause for a spine-chilling moment as the realization of what could have been sinks in. The only thing that saved him from sure death was the fact that the snake had already bitten off more than he could chew. His mouth was full. Otherwise, goner. Remind me again why we have chosen to do this?

Well, that's easy. We are on our way to Ciudad Perdida, or the Lost City, the former ceremonial cradle of the Tayrona Indians, the civilization that thrived here between the 11th and 14th centuries. Ciudad Perdida, often called the Machu Picchu of Colombia, consists of ruins that almost nobody ever visits. They are shrouded in mist and mystery and located deep inside the highest coastal mountain range in the world, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. A part of the Andes, these seaside mountains jut through Colombia, riding along its Caribbean Coast like massive tsunamis in reverse. The ruins are not easy to get to (three days walking in muddy uphill terrain), and they are very much isolated, which explains why Ciudad Perdida does not see the hordes of tourists that Machu Picchu sees. As such, its unspoiled surroundings are pristinely intact. None of us has any idea what to expect when we arrive — it's an adventure of Indiana Jones proportions.



Clockwise from top left: a view of Ciudad Perdida from a high terrace; the vessel and stick used for a sacred ritual known as the Poporo; dried coca leaves; calling it a night in hammocks at makeshift *refugios*; an ancient map of mountain trails carved into a large stone slab at Ciudad Perdida



The Colombian coast is sweltering as we slowly make our way. It's not raining, which is what it usually does here from April to November, so thankfully we only have to deal with the heat, not the mud (though a light sprinkle to cool things off wouldn't be too bad right about now). The landscape is as beautiful as it is unforgiving. Broad swaths of Crayola-green jungle pepper the surrounding hillsides in all directions, leaving no doubt that we are ascending a nearly impenetrable thicket of cloud forest rarely visited by foreigners (compared with Machu Picchu, anyway).

Though we spend two nights sleeping in hammocks at makeshift



refugios along the way, plumbing is of the modern, flushing-toilet, ceramic-seat variety (a nice surprise) and the food — whipped out nightly by our excellent guide and his jungle sous chef — is pretty darn tasty given the circumstances. Strong, thick cowboy-style coffee is available with Starbucks-like frequency. A shockingly blue-beaked toucan, domesticated and somewhat ornery, stands guard at the beer counter on our first and fifth nights. I'm beginning to think that jungle living ain't so bad.

We trek between three and five miles per day — admittedly not much, but brutal in this heat and at these angles. The elevation change is just under 4,000 feet over the 12 miles it takes to reach the ruins, but steep climbs knock the wind out of us on a regular basis. Along the way, Kogi Indians, the main indigenous group living in the Sierra today and descendants of the Tayrona, sell water, Gatorade, Snickers bars and lovely

little handwoven man-purses. As we pass, we can't help but notice that the Kogi men also carry around little unidentified vessels of varying sizes that they rub on habitually with a further unidentifiable stick. These vessels are most definitely not for sale, but I'm intrigued.

Earlier, on my bus ride from Cartagena to Santa Marta, where the trek began, I saw flocks of Indian families dressed in traditional white robes hopping on the coastal bus with bags of seashells. Finding it odd that these fiercely traditional, nonintegrated, mountain-dwelling Indians would be avid shell collectors, I asked around. Come to find out the shells are for a sacred ritual known as the Poporo. Seashells called *caracucha* are gathered from the seashore, heated over fire, and pulverized into a very thin powder by men in the tribe. The powder eventually finds its way into the *totuma* — the aforementioned vessel that the Kogi

Cocora Valley, Colombia



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Clockwise from top left: one of many river crossings on the trail to Ciudad Perdida; an ancient moss-covered stone terrace at Ciudad Perdida; following an ancient ritual, tourists walk around a circle of stones before entering or leaving Ciudad Perdida



Colombian *guaqueros* (treasure hunters) felt when they discovered Ciudad Perdida, known archeologically as Buritaca 200, in the mid-1970s.

During the South American Conquests, the Spaniards wiped out the Tayrona civilization, leaving the former Indian settlements to disappear under the cover of the lush vegetation of the Sierra. In 1499, when the two groups met, the Tayrona, despite having developed since the fifth century A.D. into an outstanding civilization with a complex social and political structure and advanced engineering skills, were decimated by the gun-toting Spaniards over the course of a fiercely fought 75-year battle. There are said to be some 300 Tayrona settlements in these mountains, all once linked by an intricate series of paved roads.

In 1975, a local man, Florentino Sepúlveda, and his two sons, Julio César and Jacobo, stumbled upon the former Tayrona capital while scouring the jungle on one of their grave-robbing expeditions. Unable to keep quiet about their find, Sepúlveda and his sons quickly found themselves at war with rival gangs, and havoc was wreaked on Ciudad Perdida. The site was looted of most artifacts, Julio César was killed, and *guaqueros* dubbed the site the *Inferno Verde*, or Green Hell (and you thought I was joking about this being an Indiana Jones-style adventure). Eventually, the government stepped in and by 1976, Ciudad Perdida had fallen under the control of the army and teams of archeologists.

Indomitable but weary, we approach the sign that we have arrived: a set of 1,200 or so moss-strewn stone steps rising mysteriously from the Buritaca River and up into the jungle. It is quite a sight. Though our legs feel like noodles at this point, up we go, slowly, and with great care — the stairs are deadly slippery when wet, which is pretty much always, thanks to the mist and fog. When we finally reach the top, we are greeted with yet another set of stairs, these far wider and less steep. It's the last leg.

Getting to Ciudad Perdida

The following companies are the most reliable for tours to Ciudad Perdida. Negotiable prices were starting at COP\$500,000 (around \$245) at press time for the five-day, all-inclusive trek.

Magic Tours
www.magictourstaganga.com
011-57-5-421-9429

Sierra Tours
www.sierratours-trekking.com
011-57-5-421-9401

Turcol
www.buritaca2000.com
011-57-5-421-2256



men are carrying around — and is casually extracted by the stick and placed in their mouths along with dried coca leaves. The Kogi men suck on the secretions throughout the day, believing the mixture instills knowledge. The leftover spittle from the stick is then rubbed on the outside of the *totuma*, causing it to bell-bottom out over time (which explains the various sizes) — an ever growing spitwad, if you will. The bigger the vessel becomes, the wiser its owner is said to be. And here I was thinking it's just where they kept their Gatorade.

*O*n the third day, we cross the waist-deep Buritaca River some nine times, and this is our indication that Ciudad Perdida is only a few hours away. By now, our curiosity is intense and easily outweighs our tiredness, dirtiness (our showers along the way consisted of dips in the river, though rudimentary showers were available) and dampness. I'm guessing that what we're feeling now must come close to what the



Catedral Primada on the Plaza de Bolívar

SLEEP

Hotel Charleston
(from \$345)
Carrera 13 No 85-46, Zona T (T Zone)
www.hotelcharlestonbogota.com

Hotel de la Ópera
(from \$165)
Calle 10 No.5-72 (Calle del Coliseo), La Candelaria
www.hotelopera.com.co

EAT

Andrés Carne de Res
Calle 3 No. 11A-56, Chía
www.andrescarnereres.com

La Puerta Falsa
Calle 11 No 6-50, La Candelaria

SEE

Capilla del Sagrario
Calle 10 (in front of the Plaza de Bolívar)
<http://idt.hechorealidad.com/capilla-del-sagrario>

Capitolio Nacional

Calle 10 con Carreras 7 y 8
<http://idt.hechorealidad.com/search/node/capitolio%20nacional>

Catedral Primada de Colombia
Avenida Carrera 7
www.catedraldebogota.org

Centro Cultural Gabriel García Márquez
Calle 11 No 5-60, La Candelaria
www.fce.com.co

Museo Botero
Calle 11 No 4-41, La Candelaria
www.lablaa.org/museobotero.htm

Museo de 20 de Julio (also known as La Casa del Florero)
Calle 11 6-94
011-57-1-282-6647
www.bogota-dc.com/places/place-6.htm

Museo del Oro
Calle 16 No 5-41, Parque Santander
www.banrep.gov.co/museo

Spotlight On: Bogotá, Colombia

I first visited Bogotá in 2002 at the beginning of President Álvaro Uribe's administration. Things were changing. A few years later, in 2005, I returned on assignment for this magazine (touring with DJ Paul Oakenfold). Things were still changing. These days, change has finally come to the city.

Take Bogotá's Museo del Oro (Gold Museum), for example. A decade ago, its spectacular wares, both intimate and fragile, knocked me out. I was floored by the world's largest and finest collection of pre-Hispanic gold work. But today, the recently renovated museum — now all shiny, modern and culturally respected — parallels Colombia's changing face. You see, Colombia has always been good, but it's only of late that people have begun to pay attention.

Back in the day, those who dared visit the country always came back with the same story: "What a wonderful place with wonderful people!" Colombians have always rolled out the red carpet for visitors because they were determined to have you leave with a different impression than they know you arrived with. It's one of the charms of a South American gem that is now witnessing a long-fought-for and long-overdue tourism renaissance that begins, for most visitors, in Bogotá.

At an elevation of 8,530 feet, Bogotá is South America's third-highest capital city. Under the thumb of imposing Andean peaks sits its historical center, Plaza de Bolívar, in the city's most colonial barrio, La Candelaria. Flanked by the rust-bronzed neoclassical buildings of the Catedral Primada de Colombia (Primada Cathedral) and the Capitolio Nacional (National Capitol), this exemplary Latin epicenter also includes the baroque Capilla

del Sagrario (Sagrario Chapel) and the modern Palace of Justice and City Hall. Ten years ago, the area was swamped with pigeons and armored military vehicles. These days, only the pigeons remain. When it rains, which is often in Bogotá, it is strangely beautiful.

And if it does rain, a perfect opportunity presents itself. A half block east on Calle 11, past 300-year-old colonial homes and the Museo de 20 de Julio (the House of the Vase), is La Puerta Falsa, one of Bogotá's oldest and most atmospheric cafés, which has been in business since 1816. This is the spot to ward off the bitter wind and rain with a cozy *canelazo* — Bogotá's signature drink made from *aguadiente*, Panela (a sweetener derived from sugarcane), cinnamon and lime, served hot. If afternoon buzzes are not your thing, everyone else is ordering another *bogotano* staple, hot chocolate with cheese, buttered bread and a biscuit (*chocolate completo*). Within two blocks on the same street, you'll find don't-miss stops dedicated to two of Colombia's most revered cultural icons: famed painter of portliness Fernando Botero (at the Museo Botero) and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* novelist Gabriel García Márquez (at the new Centro Cultural Gabriel García Márquez).

But if there is one thing in Bogotá that carries mythical status, it's a restaurant 14 miles from the city center in the suburb of Chía. Strangely named and even more esoterically described by all those who have visited, Andrés Carne de Res is, in the simplest of terms, a steak house. But it's so much more. A surreal atmosphere that includes menus housed inside metal boxes hanging from wooden pillars, it's a spot that attracts the beautiful people who come for lunch at noon and who don't end up stumbling out until 3 a.m. Like Colombia itself, it's that good. — Kevin Raub

Some 170 terraces, once foundations for Tayrona homes, form the backbone of Ciudad Perdida. More often than not, they are shrouded in an eerie jungle mist. It's an unsettling sight in its obscurity, and as we ascend the final steps and enter the complex, all we see are a few soldiers from the Colombian Army who protect the ruins on six-month sojourns. There are no tourists here whatsoever.

I remember when I saw Machu Picchu for the first time — my view was clouded by the kaleidoscopic colors of various North Face parkas and Peruvian alpaca sweaters. There were just too many people there. Here, we are alone, which lends itself to the whole sense of actually discovering something in 2010 that hasn't yet been exploited for the benefit of tourism. There is no ticket booth, no bathroom, no coat check, no buses, no overpriced-food counters, no nothing.

It's for this reason that Ciudad Perdida is a jaw-dropping sight. What it lacks in grand pyramids or towering temples, it more than makes up for in isolation and serenity. It's hard to believe it remains in its current state, not yet overwhelmed by visitors, but it's easy to understand why. For starters, this area of Colombia was once controlled by Hernán Giraldo, aka the Lord of the Sierra and the leader of the Tayrona Resistance Block, a paramilitary group who at one time refused to allow more than one trekking company to safely operate trips to Ciudad Perdida. But all that changed in 2006 when Giraldo signed a peace deal with the Colombian government and demilitarized, which allowed Ciudad Perdida to be opened up to friendly competition.

All this, not to mention that over the last few decades, all but the most intrepid travelers were afraid to visit Colombia. Fortunately, those days are over. President Álvaro Uribe's administration has clamped down on crime and drug trafficking over the past eight years, and Colombia is now considerably safer. The Colombian Army is now in firm control of the Sierra, and with that, Ciudad Perdida is now open to any and all who are willing to brave a little rain and mud, one of the world's deadliest snakes, and five days in close contact with one of South America's most beautiful and imposing mountain ranges.

Like clockwork, the heavens open up shortly after our arrival and drop another gallon or two of mist across the ruins. Nobody seems to mind. We chat with the soldiers, who are no doubt a little stir-crazy from being cooped up in the jungle for six months. We had heard a rumor that you could trade with them for their army gear, so we give it a shot, though we don't have much to offer. I decide I have nothing I'm willing to part with, but I do have cold, hard cash (there are no souvenir stalls, so it's not like I'll be needing it). I offer 30,000 Colombian pesos (about \$11) for an authentic Colombian Army camouflage hat. Deal.

The soldier rips his name tag off of the hat, and it's all mine. And so it goes. Army-issued hats, T-shirts and dog tags are exchanged. The soldiers probably shouldn't be doing this, and surely some military protocol is in breach. But Colombia has changed. **AW**

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