

LOST

in the jungle

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A decade after a group of eight hikers were kidnapped by Colombian guerillas, *Dan Slater* gets a taste for their grueling march through the jungle surrounding Ciudad Perdida – The Lost City

I puff up the final slope. It's humid, and sweat is running off me like the early-morning dew dripping from the leaves of the rainforest. I reach the top of the steps and turn to look out over the ceremonial terracing that comprises the heart of Ciudad Perdida – The Lost City. It's taken us two days to get this deep into the jungle, to where an ancient, pre-Colombian civilisation once thrived, and the view of the ruins, atop a levelled ridge and surrounded by jungled peaks, is just magnificent. I turn to congratulate Dave but he has been replaced by a stern-looking man in combat fatigues holding an automatic rifle. He gestures toward me with the barrel, and smiles. In September 2003 eight foreign hikers were kidnapped on this very spot by guerrillas from the National Liberation Army (ELN). Ten years after the killing of notorious cartel boss Pablo Escobar, Colombia was just beginning to register on the radar of the most adventurous backpackers. However, the country was still riven by warring factions: the National Armed Forces were fighting various paramilitary and rebel groups such as the ELN and FARC – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. The reasons for the conflict were many and varied, from poverty to communism to politics and drug-running, and over 220,000 civilians are thought to have died so far. Ciudad Perdida is known as the Machu Picchu of Colombia – a spectacular archaeological site, remnants of a lost civilisation, deep in a forbidding mountain range. The mountains in this case are the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the highest coastal mountain range in the world topping out at 5700 metres at the summit of Pico Simon Bolivar. Established in 1964, the National Natural Park is a sanctuary for flora and fauna, as well as home to 30,000 indigenous peoples of the Kogi, Arhuaco, Kankuamo and Wiwa cultures. Our trek started three days previously in the coastal city of Santa Marta, where we were collected from our hostel and taken to the offices of Expotur, one of only four companies registered to run tours into the mountains. Their most popular trip is the



four-, five- or six-day hike to Ciudad Perdida, each option following the same 46.6-kilometre route and costing the same 600,000 pesos – about \$250. Although unconstrained by time, Dave and I had chosen the 4-day walk because we figured the longer options meant a slower pace with more breaks, and we like walking, not waiting. Colombia is a wonderful country – huge, mountainous and friendly, and more varied than you imagine. Quite separate from the Sierra Nevada, the Andes run the length of the country and there are beaches galore on both Caribbean and Pacific coasts. The country's south-east corner is within the amazon basin and still home to undiscovered tribes. After more than 50 years of conflict the country is finally opening up again to visitors. While the fighting continues – FARC and ELN are still active – it is mostly away from tourist areas and the Sierra Nevada has been declared safe since 2005, when trekking resumed. That first morning we were loaded into jeeps and driven a couple of hours to the small trailhead town of Machete, an eerie name for a remote, peaceful village, where we ate a brief lunch while our guide organised the mules and muleteers to transport our food

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

- Flights to Colombia are quickest through LA and would most likely go to Bogota or Medellin. From there you can get an internal flight or 16 hr bus to Santa Marta.
- There are only four companies licensed to operate tours to Ciudad Perdida: Turcol, Expotur, Guías y Baquianos Tour and Wiwa Tour (the only indigenous-owned agency). We booked with Expotur after some Internet research as they were the only company that openly advertised the 4-day option and replied promptly to an email. The cost was COP 600,000 (\$250) for either 4, 5 or 6 days, with 5 days being the most popular option.
- There is plenty of accommodation in Santa Marta. We stayed at Drop Bear hostel, an Australian-owned mansion that used to house a drug cartel.
- Food on trek is plentiful and reasonably tasty but take your own snacks in case. Expect scrambled egg, chicken stew, rice, lots of fruit, with soft drinks and beer for sale up to COP 4000 (\$1.70).

along the track. We observed with interest some groups just finishing their trek – did they look relieved, scared or bored? On the contrary: loud, sweaty and muddy they downed their cold cervezas in the sun, laughing and reminiscing.

For the first day, Dave and I had been lumped in with a larger group who were doing the 5-day tour and we were soon tramping out of town behind our guide, Miguel. The track was wide and the foliage quite open as we strode steadily uphill, across a couple of shallow rivers and into the jungle. Farmhouses nestled in the misty valleys, surrounded by cultivated land, most of the inhabitants being mestizo farmers of mixed blood descent. Miguel told us of a local farmer who found millions of USD hidden in the forest. He was so scared that he told the local paramilitaries; they took it all, leaving him with just \$1 million pesos and a length of rope should he wish to hang himself. Nevertheless, it all seemed so – peaceful.

Ten years previously, the kidnapped hikers were woken in the night and told that two tourists had been killed further along the track, and that the army would be escorting them to safety. In fact, the ELN guerrillas marched them hundreds of kilometres deeper into the mountains, forcing them to walk for 15 hours at a time on a diet of rice, yucca and cane sugar. With only sheets of plastic under which to sleep, this was a somewhat more extreme trek than the one for which they had signed up.

On the other end of the scale, our group stopped repeatedly for small breaks, snacks of pineapple, maracuya (passionfruit) or lulo (tree tomato), or to swim in cool river pools. After about 3 hours we reached the first 'trail lodge' – a basic, open-sided shelter strung with hammocks and mosquito nets. There were basic toilets and showers, and long dining benches gathered at the kitchen end of the tin roof, where we sat for a wildlife lecture.

Miguel gave us an idea of what birds and animals we might see if we looked closely. Due to its isolation from the Andes, the Sierra Nevada has developed distinct flora and fauna. Orchids carpet the forest floor; Blue Morpho and Mariposa butterflies add colour to the air. There are jaguar, tapir, brocket deer and red-tailed squirrels, and the trees are alive with toucan, condor, hummingbirds and parrots. Mosquitos are rampant and carry yellow fever, a point of interest to Dave seeing as he could not have that vaccination due to a previous long-term medication. He remained philosophical though: "Apart from the fever, vomiting, jaundice, kidney failure and bleeding from every orifice," he pondered, "what's the worst that can happen?"

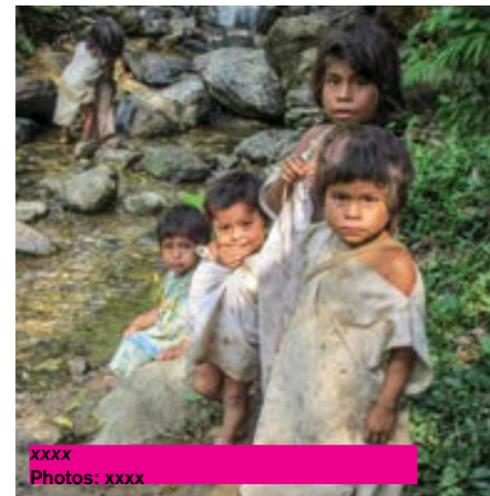
We were woken at 5am on the second day, scheduled to walk eight hours to catch up with the group that left the day before us. While delighted at the prospect of going at a decent clip, it meant being abandoned by the knowledgeable Miguel in favour of a gangly youth called Jerry – a kitchen boy. "Why must we start so early?" I asked him, blearily. "Es muy lejo," answered Jerry. "It's very far." In fact it was only 16 kilometres, which made us glad we were not expected to drag it out over two days.

After some steep and heavily-used tracks, which must have turned into mud chutes after a few minutes of rain, we were strolling through sun-dappled glades with mossy trees and chirping birdlife. "Is that a scarlet-fronted parakeet, or a crimson-backed tanager?" I asked Dave. "I dunno," he replied, "which way is it facing?" We would certainly have benefitted from Miguel's toucan-spotting abilities here. Jerry was good value ("I drink ten beers while wait in Machete," he boasted to us, "and now I sweating alcohol") but most of the day we were alone as he rushed off ahead or lingered behind to chat to mates.

Our path passed a Kogi village of circular, stone huts inhabited by chickens, pigs and ducks. The Kogi are direct descendants of the native Tairona people who inhabited Ciudad Perdida until its abandonment nearly 400

years ago. When the conquistadors arrived in the early 16th Century they chased the Tairona from their coastal settlements, forcing them to take refuge high in the Sierra Nevada. This isolation protected them for the next century but eventually Spanish settlers encroached further inland and clashes were inevitable. The tale is a familiar one: eventually the Tairona chiefs were sentenced to death, their villages burned and populations scattered.

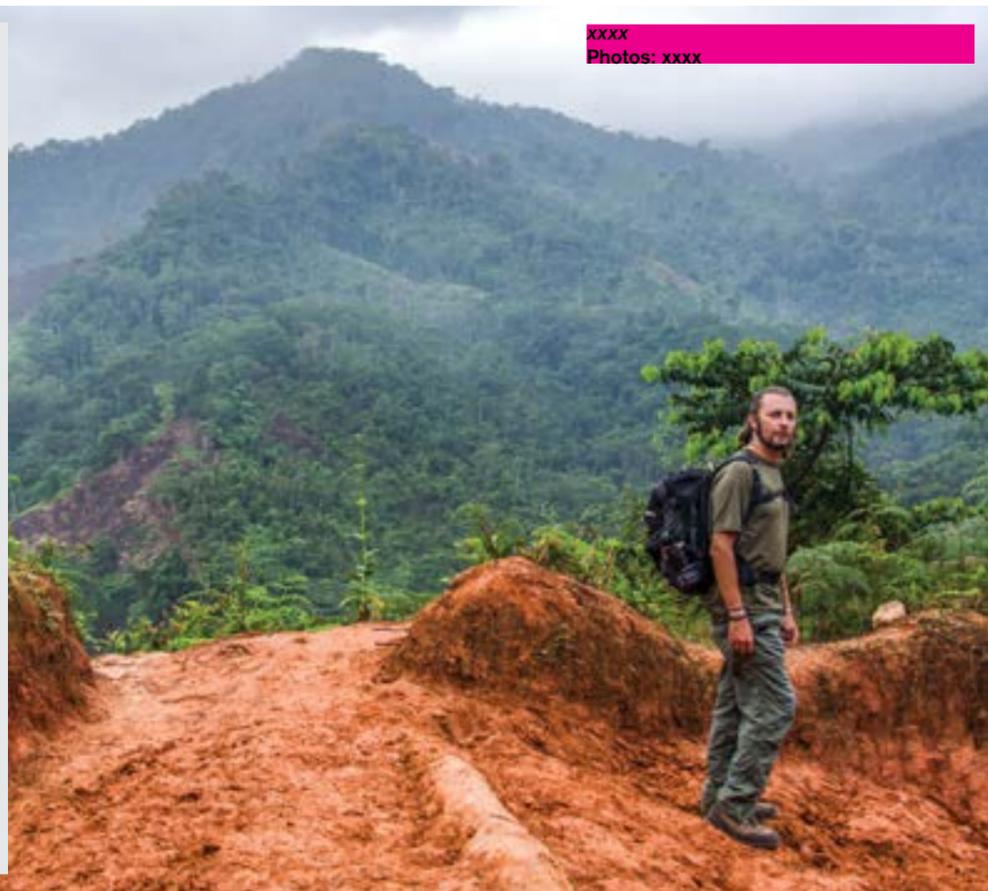
A group of children, dressed in white, cotton smocks, jet-black hair roughly trimmed, peer



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out at us. They stare silently; not shy, but curious. The Kogi live in the same simple way as they have for centuries, growing crops (cocoa beans, bananas, yucca) and raising cattle up in the clouds. The men keep coca leaves in their small, woven man-bags and chew continuously. This connects them with the earth and enables them to walk for days at a time without hunger or exhaustion.

During the abductees' forced march, one British man managed to escape his captors by dashing down a steep slope, falling numerous times, and hiding until the soldiers had given up searching. "There is no need to get him," shrugged the rebel leader, "the tigers will." Usually native to India, legend has it that one tiger roams these forests, reputed to have been released from Pablo Escobar's Medellin zoo after his death. Fortunately though, after 12 days alone, the escapee found his way to an indigenous village where they called the real army. Meanwhile, the rest of the group were taken further into the wilderness. Our visit coincided with Semana Santa, or Holy Week - the week before Easter and the largest holiday in Catholic Latin America. This is the park's busiest time of year and Camp 3, Paraiso (Paradise) with a regular capacity of 30, had to accommodate over 100 hikers – Colombian, English, Dutch, French and American. Hammocks swung bum-to-bum



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OTHER HIKES IN COLOMBIA

- Cocora Valley –relatively easy day walk through the coffee-growing highlands of central Colombia, part of Los Nevados Nacional Natural Park
- Laguna de la Magdalena –two-day hike to a small lake (3300m) near the colonial city of Popayan in the country's south west. Can be done on horseback
- Sierra Nevada del Cocuy –six-day circuit of the stunning Andean mountain range in the east is something to really get your teeth into. You'll need full camping equipment and bad-weather gear, and preferably a guide
- Pico Simon Bolivar (5700m) – also in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Despite being one of the two candidates for Colombia's highest peak, it is hardly ever climbed due to lack of permission from the local indigenous population. A real expedition (not for the inexperienced)

and washing filled every available line. The kitchen seemed to be dishing out chicken and mashed potato on a rotating basis and random bodies were sleeping, chatting or bathing down in the Buritaca River. Kogi women and children hung around the camp waiting to dine on the leftover food. I wished we could interact better with these people but we shared no common tongue and most of the guides were mestizo - a completely different culture. Even the international language of pulling faces at the babies evoked no reaction.

Juan, our new guide, advised us that the group we were supposed to join had gone up to the ruins this afternoon, having unsurprisingly arrived in plenty of time. All the better for us – it meant we'd have him to ourselves tomorrow. After an uncomfortable night of bumping hips with neighbouring swingers and the loud 'wheep, wheep' of tree frogs, we rose with the sun. Juan took us the last 1km along the river to the start of the 1200 steps – the steep ascent necessary to reach Ciudad Perdida.

The Lost City, actually called Teyuna, is believed to have been first inhabited from about 800AD, some 650 years earlier than Machu Picchu. Once the region's political and manufacturing centre, Teyuna remained overgrown and lost to all but the local indigenous population from the 17th Century until 'discovered' by looters in 1972. All the gold artefacts were stolen at this time and grave-robbars frequently killed each other over rich pickings before the authorities were alerted. Archaeological interest was triggered when artefacts from the culture began appearing for sale in Santa Marta's markets, and the site centre was fully excavated and partially reconstructed by 1982.

The city is characterised by circular structures, of which there are over 200 spread around the 30 acre site. They are built on terraces and connected via a series of contour paths and steep stairways. The foundations, some of which have been cleared and their retaining walls rebuilt, represent homes, plazas, storage areas and ceremonial buildings. With a population of approximately 2000 people, Teyuna was only the main town of the Tairona; numerous other small settlements lie undisturbed in the surrounding jungle.

As we explored the various dwellings, Juan explained aspects of the Tairona culture, in Spanish. We had specified an English-speaking guide because our language skills were, shall we say, limited, so we missed a lot of detail. Well, all the detail. "I like a bit of mystery with my Lost Cities, generally," commented Dave, "but this is ridiculous." While not quite matching the stature of the Incan city of Machu Picchu, Teyuna

culminated in a magnificent central terrace, the last section to be built and featuring the most elaborate and complex stonework. Certainly a place of ceremonial or religious significance, the top of the ridge is built up to a circular plateau that stands proudly above the surrounding jungle, swirling in the mist. It was while hiking up to a viewpoint over the plaza that I encountered the gun-toting youth. Thoughts of ELN and FARC guerrillas flashed through my brain: "This is supposed to be safe - my wife is going to kill me!" I needn't have worried though - the soldier's smile was genuine and he just wanted to shake my hand. The Colombian military now have a permanent settlement at the ruins to prevent a repeat of the kidnapping, and camping here is no longer allowed. After the daring escape, the remaining seven hostages were held at a base deep in the mountains while the guerrillas demanded an investigation into human rights abuses. They claimed that government-backed paramilitaries had been attacking peasants in the mountains. Days grew into weeks and months as an international team investigated the reports, and it was only after 102 days that the ELN released the hikers unharmed. With the guerrillas now absent from the Sierra Nevada de Marta, La Ciudad Perdida is now safe for anyone to enjoy. As I posed for a photo clutching my new friend's rifle, I reflected that, although I would have loved to spend more time hiking here, 15 hours a day for three months might have been pushing it. As Jerry would have said: 'Es muy lejo!' ^W



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Dan is a dromomaniac - afflicted with an uncontrollable urge to wander. His journeys are generally undertaken by foot, bicycle, kayak or gravity. Between outdoor articles he has managed to knock out a couple of travel books and a faux gear review blog.

