

The New York Times

EXPLORER | TAYRONA NATIONAL PARK

In Colombia, a War Zone Reclaims Its Past



Carlos Villalon for The New York Times

Swimming in the Caribbean off the beaches at El Cabo San Juan del Guía.

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Published: November 11, 2007

Correction Appended

CANTERING down a muddy path through Tayrona National Park in [Colombia](#), we pulled our horses to a stop and listened as a high-pitched chant in an unfamiliar tongue filtered through the jungle. “That’s Lorenzo,” our guide told us, turning his horse off the trail and up a steep hill toward a solitary mud hut perched on the summit.

Colombia Travel Guide

Moments later, a tiny, wizened man in a white smock, with stringy black hair that cascaded over his shoulders, emerged and squinted into the sunlight. He grasped our hands, introduced himself in broken Spanish and led us past a cooking fire into his grottolike home. A 1960s transistor radio dangled from a hook, along with some cast-iron pots and a pair of colorful knit saddlebags.

Lorenzo, a Kogui Indian from the adjacent Sierra Nevada mountain range, had recently moved his family into the park to take advantage of an explosion of tourism in this former war zone. Now he was selling the juice of the maracuyá fruit, and posing for photographs for tourists at 2,000 pesos, or about \$1, a snap. “The government tried to throw us out, but they just gave up,” he said. “This land belonged to the Kogui long before it belonged to Colombia.”

Plunging down to the Caribbean Sea from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, one of the highest coastal mountain ranges in the world, Tayrona National Park has long been known to connoisseurs as one of the wildest and most beautiful corners of [South America](#). Its roughly 58 square miles, carved out of the equatorial rain forest by the Colombian government in 1964, is among the most biologically diverse of any coastal zone in the Americas: dusky titi monkeys, red squirrels, collared peccaries, jaguars and 200 species of [birds](#) ranging from [Caribbean](#) toucans to red woodpeckers.

Below the mountains sprawl wild, palm-fringed [beaches](#), framed by sea-sculptured boulders and connected by footpaths through the jungle. The area is studded with archaeological sites left by Tayrona’s indigenous tribes — the Koguis and the Arhuacos — who settled the region in pre-Columbian times.

Until recently, however, Tayrona was associated more with civil war and the narcotics trade than with tourism. For years the park and its environs were a battleground between the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#) (FARC), one of the Western Hemisphere’s oldest Marxist guerrilla groups, and right-wing paramilitary groups, both of whom coveted the region as a base for cocaine processing and smuggling.

In 2003, armed gunmen kidnapped eight foreigners, during a raid inside the park. Three of Tayrona’s directors have been killed in recent years, most recently Marta Lucia Hernández, who was gunned down three and a half years ago, apparently because she resisted the demands of paramilitary groups to use the park as a cocaine-shipment point.

Now, however, Tayrona has been transformed. In late 2003, the Colombian president, [Álvaro Uribe](#), began a military crackdown that defanged right-wing death squads, confined the FARC largely to the southern jungles and brought kidnappings down from about 2,000 in 2003 to 687 last year, with 393 occurring between January and September of this year. With the Sierra Nevada now largely safe, the government has set about promoting Tayrona as a tourist paradise. Central to that effort was awarding the main tourism concession inside the park to Aviatur, the country’s largest travel agency.

The jewel of Aviatur’s operation is the \$245-a-night Ecohabs resort, a complex of secluded huts built into the side of a jungled cliff overlooking the sea. “Before, it was just a patch of jungle with poorly



maintained facilities,” said our taxi driver, Argemiro Toncel, of Tayrona. His wife is a chef at the Ecohabs. “It’s all so much better now.”

The jumping-off point for Tayrona is the coastal city of Santa Marta, Colombia’s oldest town, founded by the Spanish in 1525 and best known as the place where Simón Bolívar, the Latin American liberator, died. The photographer Carlos Villalon and I flew in one balmy September evening from Bogotá, and took a taxi 30 minutes along the coast to the city’s colonial quarter. The old part of town, anchored around a charming cobblestone plaza and a centuries-old cathedral, possesses a smattering of faded old hotels and apartment buildings with marble-tiled courtyards, fountains and other flourishes.

But the city, otherwise, is dilapidated, reminiscent of the most neglected parts of old [Havana](#) — but with Daewoo taxis instead of vintage 1940s and 1950s Chevrolets. The Colombian government has been talking for years about turning Santa Marta into “a new Cartagena”— the beautifully restored coastal city 113 miles west — but the renovation program has never gotten off the ground.

Santa Marta is worth a night’s stopover, if only for a visit to a piece of hallowed ground: Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino, the butterscotch yellow hacienda where Bolívar, desperately ill with tuberculosis, died on Dec. 17, 1830. The hacienda — a modest adobe villa set around an ocher-tiled courtyard — still has the canopied wooden bed where Bolívar drew his last breaths. Across the courtyard is the smoking chamber where Bolívar’s host and others retired for cigars so as not to torment Bolívar’s deteriorating lungs.

A large glass case displays the carriage that brought Bolívar to the hacienda, and across the magnificently landscaped grounds rises the Benitez clan’s original sugar cane processing plant. The only jarring note is a massive neo-Classical memorial built out of concrete on the 100th anniversary of the Liberator’s death — more suitable to Pyongyang, I thought, than to this sleepy Caribbean outpost.

After visiting Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino, we continued 20 miles east along the Troncal del Caribe, the two-lane coastal highway, to Tayrona National Park. At the park entrance, we turned off the tarmac road and followed a muddy path through the jungle toward the visitors’ center three miles away. Then, our driver plunged his taxi through a rain-swollen stream, sinking it to its axles in the mud. Each spin of the tires dug the car in deeper; nearly an hour passed before a ranger appeared with a tow rope and a Jeep Cherokee and dragged him out of the sludge.

It was our first indication that, despite the tourist influx over the last two years (at the season’s height, between Christmas and early February, the park can receive 1,500 visitors a day) Tayrona’s infrastructure remains maddeningly — or appealingly — underdeveloped.

At a thatched-roof hut in a dirt clearing, we hired horses for the 40-minute journey down a jungle trail to Arrecifes Beach. Black-faced, gray-maned titis darted through the dense mangrove forests that hemmed us in on both sides. The ground was alive with movement: violet crabs skittered in and out of holes in the earth, and armies of biting red ants carried tiny green morsels of the forest to their lairs. The trail leveled off, and we found ourselves in a grove of coconut palms, and beyond was a sweep of sand miles long and entirely deserted — with good reason. A sign warned that 200 people had drowned in its riptides since 1964.

At Arrecifes, we settled into comfortable beachside bungalows and dined barefoot at a fine outdoor restaurant on shrimp ceviche, grouper fillets and cold Colombian beer.

Tayrona's swimming beaches lay farther west, reached by a trail that dips and climbs through the rain forest and over mounds of giant white boulders. We clambered over rough wooden bridges, ladders and staircases built into the rocks, offering splendid views of the sea, and arrived at a pair of horseshoe-shaped coves — the fabled beaches of El Cabo San Juan del Guía.

Jungle-covered hills rose precipitously over cream-colored strips of sand lined by 70-foot coconut palms — like something from the set of "Lost." On this hot September afternoon, the only other visitors were a dozen young Israelis recently finished with their army service. We lazed on the beach and splashed in the aquamarine water until distant rumbles of thunder roused us from our reverie. With flashes of lightening on the horizon, we leapt from the sea and beat a retreat back toward Arrecifes.

We ended our visit to Tayrona with a stay at the Ecohabs, a dozen secluded luxury cabins meant to suggest traditional Kogui dwellings, built into the cliffs high above the Caribbean. Despite the name, the place evinces no special environmental consciousness — electricity is provided by a diesel generator — but the setting is extraordinary. A stone path switchbacked steeply above the sea, winding 200 feet to the highest bungalow, where we were booked for the night. Far below, the [surf](#) was thundering, and the sky over the jungled Sierra Nevada glowed peach and gold in the fading light.

I settled on a hammock on the stone base and listened to the waves crashing against the rocks. Not long ago, that very beach might well have been a launching point for boats laden with cocaine; but from this vantage point, Colombia's war seemed a distant memory.

Source:

<http://travel.nytimes.com/2007/11/11/travel/11Explorerer.html>