



COLOMBIA

A FLYING VISIT

Colombia's natural riches are open to the world now its civil war is over. Emma Duncan ventures into former guerrilla-held territory in search of rare birds

EMMA DUNCAN | JUNE/JULY 2018



The hillside opposite our perch is covered with more textures and colours of trees than it's possible to count. We're sitting in enforced stillness because Nick Bayly, the ornithologist accompanying us, is determined that we should see a keel-billed

toucan, the most glamorous bird in the Sierra Nevada, Colombia. As we wait, I study the trees. It's nothing like an English forest: the green is brighter, the leaves larger and the plants among the branches are brilliant hues. Aside from some vultures circling above us, nothing is moving.

Suddenly Nick points. "There," he says, softly but urgently. "Just went into the giant ceiba tree below the crest at two o'clock." Among the hundreds of trees around that location I have no idea what to look at, but Nick points to a weird-looking one with a bulbous trunk. Through my binoculars I can just see movement among its branches. Minutes pass. Then an odd-shaped bird with an oversized beak emerges in a flash of yellow. In a microsecond it is gone.

I am delighted with a tiny glimpse of this avian rock star, but Nick suggests patience. We sit, absolutely still, for a little longer, enveloped by a tapestry of birdsong. I find myself separating the different strands, no idea what species are making these sounds, but increasingly aware of the vast number of creatures hidden around us. Then there is another flash, this time above us. The toucan is here, in all its absurd brilliance: lime-green, red and orange beak almost as big as the sleek black body and yellow chest that set it off. It hops between branches, pecking and plucking at fruit, coming close enough for us to photograph and take home a memory of an extraordinary jungle encounter.



Toucan play

MAIN IMAGE A keel-billed toucan

ABOVE The Cascada Valencia, Santa Marta



A magnificent male Andean cock-of-the-rock



Bird's-eye view

Looking across the cloud forest from the terrace of Casa Galavanta

With more bird species than anywhere else in the world, Colombia is ornithological heaven. The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a mountain range on the northern coast, 100m years older than the Andes, is a special sort of avian paradise. Its slopes rise steeply out of the Caribbean; its highest peak, the snowy Cristóbal Colon, is around 64 kilometres (40 miles) away from the tropical coastline, as the crow – along with a wide range of other birds – flies. The variety of microclimates has given rise to the astonishing array of bird species: around the same number as Canada in an area 600 times smaller. So rich in biodiversity is it that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature calls it the world's “most irreplaceable” site for endangered species.

Isolation has helped protect Colombia's biodiversity. It has just emerged from half a century of civil war. The “armed struggle”, as it is known locally, killed a quarter of a million people, retarded development and discouraged most tourists. A peace deal between the government and the left-wing FARC guerrillas has now been signed.

News is spreading that Colombia is the place to go, and my friend Anne and I were keen to get there before everybody else. She was enthusiastic about the hiking, the scenery and the sea, but sceptical about the birds: “I get that they're pretty, but I don't get why you care if they're rare.” That aspect of bird-watching – list-making – speaks to my inner trainspotter. It has the satisfaction of hunting – the stalking, the waiting, the triumph – without the death. But mostly I enjoy ornithology as a sort of enforced meditation. You have to be quiet, to focus. You have to look long and carefully at things. Fishing has a similar appeal but casting a line, unlike peering through binoculars, requires skills I do not possess.

For this part of our trip we stay in a private house, Casa Galavanta. It is built of wood, with a glass front that looks out across the cloud forest – like a rainforest, only cooler and less sodden – towards the sea 10km away. The garden is full of hibiscus and heliconia, those lobster-claw-like flowers that look sadly out of place in northern flower markets and

fabulous in situ. The house's comforts are enhanced by the skills of the chef, Sergio Torres, whose pork loin with passion fruit and ginger will stay with me until my dying day, and whose attention to detail stretched to providing written instructions on how our picnic breakfast should be laid out.



The area was once occupied by the FARC guerrillas, and subsequently by right-wing paramilitaries. Now both of these have been replaced by birdwatchers. There are lodges catering to hikers and ornithologists and plenty of local guides, but Nick is a Briton who used to live in the Sierra Nevada and now runs a conservation NGO in Bogotá. His ability to identify at a hundred paces the dullest little creature zipping through the branches is startling. Not that many of them are dull; one of the world's great ornithological mysteries is why tropical birds are so brilliant compared with their more-muted temperate counterparts. (The most plausible theory is that coloration is an evolutionary advantage more easily available to birds in tropical climates because the food is better than in temperate regions.)

Civil war has left the roads in a shocking state, so the best way to see the forest is on foot. Below the house, coffee bushes grow under the trees. Founded by British settlers in the 19th century, the plantation was taken over by a German-Mexican family and then, briefly, by paramilitaries. "They slept in our beds and drank our wine," says Claudia Weber, the current occupant. Walking back to the house we spot some of the Sierra Nevada's most gorgeous birds – the crimson-backed tanager, the crested oropendola (which weaves hanging nests) and the crimson-crested woodpecker – as well as many of the endemic species (found nowhere else), such as the Santa Marta brushfinch, the ant bird and the forest gleaner. I am captivated by the natural riches, and even Anne starts to engage. "There's a bird!" She shouts, as a russet-coloured creature shoots out from the undergrowth. She's right, but it's not one that fascinates ornithologists: it's a chicken.



Unto the beach

Cabo San Juan, Tayrona National Park, on Colombia's Caribbean coast.



Lazuline sabrewing – a rare hummingbird

We float in a boat down the Don Diego river, which flows from the Sierra Nevada to the coast, past Colombians having their Sunday swim, past sharp-eyed kingfishers, sunbathing vultures and every imaginable sort of heron, to the Caribbean. Where the mountains and the river meet the sea, the water teems with life. Stilt and sandpiper paddle around the shore; pelican and tern dive for fish. The light changes constantly as clouds form and then clear. It's one of the most astonishingly beautiful places I've been to, and yet there's nobody there except us and a few weekenders Colombians in the distance, splashing around in inner tubes, and some thigh-deep fishermen, casting their nets in the mouth of the river, stalked by herons.

On the coast road, there are a few army checkpoints, but the soldiers wave us past without much interest. We feel entirely safe; despite Colombia's violent past, we sense no hostility, only welcome.

For the next part of the trip we stay in the One Love Reserve, a group of *cabanas* hidden among the banana palms, built by a rich local for his friends and family, and subsequently turned into a hotel. It is on a bend in the Palomino river, with its own sandy river-beach. We swim in the river, or at least struggle upstream against the fast flow of the water, as though working out on some strenuous gym-machine, then float back. The first night, we seem to be the only guests. That's fine by us; if we catch sight of a whooping motmot or squirrel cuckoo the next day it will be enough of a party for us. But if, as conservationists hope, Colombia's rich natural resources are to generate enough revenue to encourage it to preserve that beauty, it will need more high-end tourists; I hope – and fear – that they will come soon enough.

We persuade the staff to turn off the music in the bar that overlooks the fast-running river, and, while the bats zip to and fro, listen to the silence. Over the sound of the water and the buzz of the cicadas, there's a loud squawk nearby. "That's a bird!" says Anne, who is now well into the swing of this ornithology business. It's a frog.



Red devils

Scarlet ibis flying to roost



Cartagena's old city

Four hours along the coast from Santa Marta is one of the loveliest cities in Latin America. The houses in Cartagena's old city (*above*) are painted as brilliantly as tropical birds. A 16th-century fort and ten-metre-thick city walls protected it from the British and other pirates.

Cartagena's charm, like Colombia's, stems in part from a period of isolation. As Fernando Rivera, a local historian, explains to us, the Spanish invaders chose the city's location because it was an excellent natural port, but it had no transport connection to the country's interior – the source of the gold that was its main attraction. So they built a canal – 118km long, astonishingly, in 1582 – to connect the city to the Magdalena river, Colombia's main artery. By the early 19th century, the canal had silted up, so trade moved to other coastal cities. Cartagena went into a decline, portrayed in Gabriel García Márquez's "Love in a Time of Cholera", and thanks to its economic irrelevance, nobody bothered to knock down its lovely 17th- and 18th-century streets.

Two centuries on, it is flourishing again; a modern centre, full of high-rise offices and apartment blocks, has sprung up alongside the old city. But since tourism has made history marketable, its old quarters have been refurbished rather than bulldozed, and many of its vivid buildings and shaded courtyards turned into boutique hotels and restaurants. It's not Venice, though: the old city is still full of locals – office workers hurry along with briefcases under their arms and schoolchildren jostle for fresh buns at the bakery. We stay at the impeccably stylish Hotel Bastión, which has an unexpected ornithological bonus: a resident vulture that hops into the rooftop swimming pool when the guests have vacated it, and flaps around in an ungainly but endearing manner.

Fernando takes us to La Boquilla, a mangrove swamp just outside town, for a final avian outing. The pollution that killed off some of the mangroves has been cleared up, and new mangroves have been planted. The place is thick with heron, kingfisher, ibis and much more; Fernando spots 41 different species. Anne, now a converted birdwatcher, points skywards. "There's a bird!" she shouts. I'm touched by her enthusiasm and tell her that it is – like several thousand others around us – a heron. "No!" says Fernando. "It's a roseate spoonbill!" It's our first.

Emma Duncan was a guest of Miraviva, supported by ProColombia. miravivatravel.com

CARTAGENA ON A PLATE

Cartagena's cuisine is fishy and Caribbean, with unusual fruits and vegetables. I've never eaten as well as I did there. Our favourite place was **Caffé Lunático**. The chef, Maria Delgado, spent ten years living with her grandmother in Spain. She puts a sophisticated Iberian spin on local specialities: she serves yucca as the lightest gnocchi, with a dressing of onion, tomato, coriander and chilli. Don't miss her deep-fried squid with green mango ceviche. Lunch was one of the best of my life.

El Boliche Cebicheria, a six-table hole in the wall, serves vast mussels in a tangy broth. The ceviche is flavoured with tamarind, sour cream or coconut. Colombia's president, in town for the day, turned up with a bevy of glamorous women while we were there; still, we managed to walk in without a booking.

Carmen serves complex Caribbean-Asian dishes in a shady courtyard. The snapper with lychee *chimichurri*, yam, black tempura banana and much else was sensational, the mojitos made with lulo, a local fruit, lethal.

At **La Esquina del Pan de Bono**, a street-corner bakery, locals queue for *pan de bono* – hot, soft, yucca-flour rolls. Humanity has invented no better snack.

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MAP: LLOYD PARKER.

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