



Colombia is home to more endemic species than any other country.

JUNGLE LIFE

On Colombia's Pacific Coast, amidst trees that walk and whales that sing, megadiversity meets Magical Realism in an oddly familiar way

By David Webb

PRECIPITATION PUMMELS MY CABIN'S metal roof. It sounds like a ringing cymbal. It is the dawn of my second day on Colombia's Pacific Coast and the only constant has been this morning rain.

The day previous, while flying from Medellín to Colombia's *Region del Pacífica*, I had been asked if I'd ever visited a rainforest. As a Vancouverite, I thought I lived in one. But as our Dornier 328 descended over Bahia Solano, a Jurassic scene unfolded below. Boundless, primordial jungle appeared beneath clouds as dense as steel wool; all sopped in moisture and carved by rushing rivers that surge seaward from the slopes of the Andes. Edging the northern border of 54,000-hectare Utria National Natural Park, this area receives 8,000 millimetres of annual rainfall; Vancouver sees a piddling 1,200. The overwhelming wetness permeates everything: clothes, skin, luggage. And because of this, there is a conspicuous

vitality that only such a natural hothouse could create.

Between the beach and our cabins, I see the ground seethe with a blanket of tireless leaf-cutter ants. At night, dozens of poison dart frogs sit like sentinels around our huts, croaking to punctuate a wall of noise that emanates from a jungle replete with bugs, bats and birds. Colombia is a country with such incredible biodiversity it is dubbed "megadiverse," as if the scientific community simply couldn't come up with a concrete classification for the variety of life. "Mega" was the best they could do. Colombia harbours 20 per cent of the world's plant species and 10 per cent of the world's animal species. Due to uniquely varied environs packed densely into a mid-sized tropical country — 5,000-metre-plus alpine, Pacific and Caribbean coastline and the Amazon basin — it is also home to more endemic

species than any other country in the world.

An excess of water nurtures all of this life. Colombia is the seventh freshwater-rich country on Earth and in South America it is second only to much-larger Brazil. The precipitation doesn't bother me, though. The remote rainforest environs allow me to transition to Dirtbag Mode — shunning our eco-lodge's cold showers for a quick scrub with a baby wipe. Ninety-five per cent humidity combined with daytime highs over 30 degrees Celsius makes bathing pointless. It's best to just smell like the jungle.

FIERCE EQUATORIAL SUN REPLACES THE rainfall by mid-morning and our group of seven jungle-trekkers congregates beside the Valle River estuary at the edge of scruffy El Valle town. We mirror the region's megadiversity: monolingual travellers from Vancouver, New York and London, two Bogota-based ▶

tourism officials — and for today, our lodge manager, Bernardo, and Balmes, a local bird-watching guide. By foot and by boat, for the next week we will make our way through the coastal areas within and around Bahia Solano and Nuqui. And each of us resides on a sliding scale of understanding the other, just to make things a touch more interesting.

Wearing Wellington boots and sodden in sweat, we set out over a swaying suspension bridge and onto a boggy trail that leads to a remote marine turtle sanctuary within Utria Park. As we hike, Balmes — toting a 40x spotting scope and digital birdsong — guides us in a search for rare endemic *baudo oropendola*, a gold-tailed avian known for building dangling, basket-like nests. It isn't long before I see a 20-metre-tall mahogany tree rife with swinging oropendola nests; twisted limbs adorned with these hanging baskets resembles a Dr. Seuss illustration. A Choco toucan, with its comically oversized black-and-yellow bill, shows up as we search for the park's remaining 648 bird species. Between bird-sightings, cobalt blue saucer-sized morpho butterflies flutter past and we spot the occasional venomous spider, usually denoted by an orange abdomen. I ask Balmes about snakes. He rambles off a list of serpents in quick-spoken Spanish. As the *boa constrictor* is the only animal whose scientific name is the same as its common, it is a warning universally understood.

"Solo por la noche," he assures. (Only at night.)

Hiking in a mucky jungle is tough work. Suction-cup mud pulls my boots off with regularity, and frequent, prolonged stops to spot birdlife lengthen our time in the energy-sapping, sauna-like environs. Streams, always in high water, are omnipresent obstacles; we muddle around, searching for fallen logs or rickety one-at-a-time bridges on which to cross. It takes us two hours to reach our destination: *Tortugario Asociacion Caguama*. Here, hard-working locals steward endangered olive ridley turtles. Tourist visits such as ours, as well as regional educational programs, spread their message of conservation.

Today's host, Evelin Perez, welcomes us with a special show. Several dozen olive ridley turtles had hatched at 8:30 a.m. and await release from a large plastic tub. I peer overtop — the sand-grey newborns appear within



Utria Park sees few visitors.



Releasing newly-hatched olive ridley turtles in Utria Park.

like Claymation figurines, crawling atop one another instinctively in search of the ocean. They must be put out to sea — air temperature is rising to dangerous levels.

We run the tub to the shoreline and tip it over — turtle babies spill out onto the wet sand and scramble towards the ocean. Waves push them back, but each perseveres past the whitewash and into the tropical Pacific — except one loner, who, after a dozen attempts, has yet to clear the break. Perez helps nature along with a scoop of her hand; I worry about its chances long-term, having failed this first Darwinian test. Nevertheless, these newborns likely have more days ahead of them than I do — a testament to the species' longevity.

Naturally, humankind is these turtles' greatest threat. Egg harvesting and turtle hunts decimate a species that takes about as long as we do to reach its sexual maturity. Eggs must be collected and kept in a fenced off-rookery and the hatchlings released under such close supervision. Regionally, schoolchildren are educated to eschew tur-

tle soup and eggs and to pass this message on to their elders.

Boots off and savouring cool water from fresh coconuts, we hike back towards El Valle along an expansive copper-sand beach. Drove of scurrying red crabs leap from their hiding spots as we approach — they flee and then circle back behind us, scattering across the sand in the thousands and encircling us as we walk. A flock of turkey vultures descends nearby to feed on a dolphin carcass. Eyes pointed offshore, we watch for breaching humpback whales — it is calving season and as many as 3,000 of these beasts have swum north from Antarctica to give birth in Colombia's fertile waters. Every step forward holds a validation of the megadiversity we have come to expect.

OVER THE REMAINING DAYS, I FIND familiarity in Colombia's Pacific Coast. It resembles my birthplace, Vancouver Island, in an unexpected fashion. Like camping in Tofino, here, I wake to clouds, rain and fog — but by mid-afternoon, wind clears the sky and it's time for SPF 30. Near Nuqui, iron-grey hard-packed beaches are reminiscent of those within Pacific Rim National Park, as are the weather-beaten rock formations that flank each sandy stretch and the damp rainforest rimming the coast. Throughout the region, choppy waves smash the shoreline without relief, seasonally attracting a surf scene, and runoff creeks leak from the forest every few dozen metres. Driftwood piles at the high tide lines. Hummingbirds hover atop vibrant flowers, sandpipers prance on the shoreline and ospreys dive-bomb the inshore marine areas.

But like a Bizzaro World, other aspects

are turned upside down. This is, after all, the Pacific *Southwest* — so rather than sitka spruce and cedar trees, spindly milpesos palms and thick-trunked mahogany trees line the beaches. We uncover oddball endemic flora like *Samia oblicua*, a stiff-leaved shrub unchanged since the dinosaurs roamed the Earth, and *Socratea exorrhiza* — the walking palm — a tree that actually walks across the forest floor to find better sunlight. In August and September, sea turtles mate offshore — swimming in an embrace for days or weeks at a time. Macaws, parrots and toucans chatter at us from the treetops. Calving whales call out so emphatically their song permeates the air — an auditory experience later blessed upon us during a boat-ride offshore of Utria. Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s inspiration seems so obvious. Nature, magical on its worst day, is surreal in Colombia.

NOW IN BETTER TIMES, COLOMBIA HAS IN TURN seen a 300 per cent increase in tourism since 2006 — though most travel to Bogota and Cartagena. Remote Bahia Solano and Nuqui

deserve a closer look; these regions are effectively undiscovered by outsiders. The first wave of domestic tourists showed up only 27 years ago and a big rush of foreigners has yet to occur. But it will. I am certain Bahia Solano and Nuqui will be spoken about in decades to come by today’s adventure travellers the same as hedonistic hotspots like Bali or Goa are by hippie-era backpackers today: “*You should have seen it back then...*”

Rather than the mega-resorts found on coastlines in so many tropical regions, I discover *real* eco-lodges speckling Bahia Solano and Nuqui. Operations like El Almehal, which prides itself in a four-part environmental ethos that includes composting table scraps to grow food on-site, grassroots conservation efforts, working with local craftspeople and fishermen and spreading enviro-education to guests and locals. Or El Cantil, a boat-access lodge that won’t even offer 24-hour electricity — cabins are lit with oil lamps — and asked us to pack-out our garbage. Or Utria’s Visitor’s Centre, an off-grid bunkhouse whose lamp-lit rooms are so open to the

wilderness the orchestra of nighttime jungle noise nearly requires earplugs. And at each, rain washes away lazy sunbathers but welcomes those willing to sacrifice any semblance of aridity for a promise of megadiversity and a hint of Magical Realism.

My final day in *Region del Pacifica* dawns and I once again wake to precipitation machine-gunning the roof. It is a familiar sound; an altogether appropriate send-off as I depart these gloriously rain-soaked, impossibly vital, wild Pacific shores. ☘



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