

Getting Lost in the Lost City

by Sonya Angelica Diehn

The tropical jungle is damn hot, humid too. I'm dripping with sweat.

I didn't do a good job paring down what to bring. My pack is heavy, and I start to feel it as we climb a steep hill. The clouds that have been gathering all afternoon spill their load, and the path – a clay trench turned up by mules – becomes a slick waterfall. Trudging up the trail, I get soaked to the bone.

Soon the trail levels out, and heads downhill. "Why did I worry about getting my feet wet," I think while crossing the river. I am drenched from head to toe, feet squishing in my socks.

The others have hiked faster than me – my Israeli travel companion David, and our Colombian guide Rodrigo. They've already joined the rest of our tour group at the first camp, a surprisingly comfortable rectangular thatch hut with clay hearth, long table and benches, and a flush toilet. We sleep under mosquito nets in cloth hammocks slung side by side between the ceiling beams.



Setting off from camp the next morning, we see mud houses scattered amongst the hills. David and I talk, sometimes Rodrigo joins in, all three walking and talking and laughing. Rodrigo, dark skinned and a native of nearby Santa Marta, is small and strong and handsome, with short-cropped hair. He always has a smile whether he understands

us or not.

The landscape is breathtakingly beautiful. Jungle and coca fields create a rich green cover for the hills, which roll away in the distance below a striking blue sky with cumulous clouds billowing above. Rodrigo often stops to converse with locals, and I get the impression that he's a community leader of sorts. He's been a regular guide for years, and everyone seems to know him.

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is a major coca-growing region. Small farmers have cleared out patches of jungle to grow the illicit crop, along with their food staples. Deeper in the mountains are the aristocratic land barons, the large producers with their private heavy-duty security forces, or *paramilitares*. The rugged terrain is also home to Colombia's *guerrillas*, leftist revolutionary movements.

We arrive at a Kogi village of circular huts, some with walls made of branches, and others of clay. All have thatched roofs with twin peaks, symbolizing the unified duality of male and female, sun and moon. The trail leads directly through the center of the village; not wanting to intrude, we wait for Rodrigo before continuing. Rodrigo informs us that the larger huts are men's quarters, and the smaller, women's. Men and women live apart, and since the home is considered a sacred place, they do not have sexual relations there.

When the Spaniards arrived they brought disease and enslaved captives, bringing an end to the Teyuna way of life. The surviving Teyunas, their numbers ravaged by sickness, retreated deeper into the rugged mountains. The city, sacked and abandoned, was quickly overgrown by the jungle.

In recent times, *mestizo* farmers settled the area. The Kogi people – descended from Teyuna – gradually migrated into the surrounding river canyons such as the Buritaka. The Kogi retained a memory of their ancient city in the hills, and looked upon it as a sacred ancestral site.

After following the Buritaka River for three days, we reach a stone stairway leading up the steep bank of the canyon. "There are 2,800 steps," says Rodrigo, "leading up to the city." I climb slowly into the soft mist and lose count as the fog thickens to rain doing nothing to drive away the mosquitoes. Towards the top, the steps level out and the misty rain swirls away to reveal a wide staircase. This is the *Escalera de la Reina*, named by Spaniards for their queen. On either side, tall trees press in, their thick lianas dangling over the stairway.



It's a scene straight out of Indiana Jones.

Rodrigo explains how a network of stone pathways connects terraces to form platforms. Houses, circular structures made of branches and clay with thatched roofs, were built on these platforms and looked much like the Kogi dwellings we'd passed the day before.

"So we've arrived?" I ask eagerly, squinting ahead, unable to see more than the stone

pathway under our feet and the rock wall to the left. Indeed, where we stand marks the start of the Lost City, one of the most extensive pre-Colombian settlements in South America, larger even than Machu Picchu. The wood and thatch structures have long since rotted away. The enigmatic Lost City one sees today is what's left – the broad terraces, stone stairways, and sturdy walls.

Beyond the terraces, a bamboo footbridge



spans a waterfall. On the other side, there is an adobe hearth and a long wooden table with benches near a three-story wooden structure: our shelter for this night and the next. Rain sets in just after we arrive.

The next morning dawns with glorious sunshine. Rodrigo leads us around the city describing the many medicinal uses for the cultivated and wild herbs we encounter. I pluck some leaves off a coca plant – but chewing them without lye to releases the alkaloid, I feel absolutely nothing.

When the Teyuna inhabited the city they cut back the surrounding jungle. The climate was moister then, and there were probably even more mosquitoes. There's been a warming and drying trend in recent decades. The moss-covered steps under our feet would have been bare from constant usage. Listening to Rodrigo, I form a mental picture of what life must have been like during the city's

heyday – bustling with activity and people going about their daily lives. We come to the “Fountain of Youth,” a rippling waterfall cascading over slippery smooth rocks with a beautiful swimming hole below. Everyone plunges in.

I marvel at the construction of this site that has endured through the centuries. Rodrigo points out how its builders ingeniously staggered the stone steps to create channels for drainage. By directing the water around obstacles on its downward path, they purposely slowed the flow. The forethought that went into the construction is remarkable, showing the engineering skills and connection to nature of this ancient people.

The bamboo footbridge back to camp seems a frail wisp over the creek, grown furious with white water. I clutch the handrails tightly, terrified by the churning water below.

I chat with Rodrigo and I am shocked to learn that he only earns four dollars a day as a guide. The hours are long, but he loves the work. In his previous job, he guarded long distance trucks, which he says are routinely robbed.

Rodrigo stops to cut some leaves from a plant. “I’ll send these to my daughter,” he says, “She suffers leg pains and this plant helps.” I make a mental note to leave a big tip.

On our way back to town, we hear there's a roadblock ahead. I don't know about the others, but David and I get a rush of paranoia. Rodrigo says, “It's the U.S. military.”

The United States Army? Here in Colombia? This close to the Lost City?

Colombia, after all, gets a lot of money



from the U.S. — about six billion dollars from Plan Colombia since 2000. Though as we've seen, it hasn't done much to curb cocaine production.

David and I stumble into Mamey, where the rest of our tour group has been sitting around for hours. I am ready for the comfort of a bed, a hot shower, and there is even talk of pizza. Rodrigo has been in town for a while. Our bus hasn't been able to get through the roadblock. I picture myself marching down there and chatting up the American soldiers, telling them how much I miss my family, and rock 'n' roll, and cajoling them into letting our bus through.

My fantasy evaporates as an old jalopy of a cargo truck pulls up. This is our "bus." The roadblock has come down. We pile into the back, pulling the wooden grate shut behind us. As we roll through villages in the dark,

I catch a glimpse of a bare brick room lit by a single bulb. A woman sits at the window looking out.

We bump onwards towards the coast, and I watch the lightning show on distant clouds. To me, the erratic flashing is emblematic of the deep mysteries of existence, and at this moment, it is beautiful beyond description.

