# GREAT TREKS

The gringo guide to Colombia’s National Parks | 2nd Edition

By Kevin Barker.

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## About the author

Born and raised in the towering boreal forests of Western Canada, Kevin Barker is an armchair naturalist and former investigative reporter for Equity Magazine, an award winning business journal in Vancouver, B.C. Now a lifestyle guru based in Bogotá, Colombia, his various incarnations as columnist (Kevin Barker's Costa Rica Postcard), book author (The Canadian Retirement Guide to Costa Rica and the Tropics), and long time Canadian expatriate lends a unique perspective on how to live humbly but well south of the equator. A resident of Costa Rica, Colombia, and Chile since 2001, he has experienced first-hand the joys of expatriate life and its foibles.

**Other books by Kevin Barker |**

[Cashing Out: The Great Canadian Retirement Guide to Costa Rica](http://www.amazon.ca/Cashing-Out-GREAT-Canadian-Retirement-ebook/dp/B008ZPZ6VA/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1397531319&sr=8-1&keywords=cashing+out+the+great)

[](http://thebarkerletter.com/)

## Introduction

Seasoned travelers tend to agree that Colombia's national parks are the greatest story never told. In fact if you’ve been to Colombia at all you probably visited one, and didn’t even know it. You haven’t heard of them because Colombia has not yet extolled their virtues to the English speaking world through the mass media. However, park designation and development continues apace. The newest of these, the Uramba Bahia Malaga located one hour from the Pacific port of Buenaventura in the country's rarely travelled Pacific region, was only unveiled in 2010. And there are more to come. While its regions remain rugged and difficult to access in many places, the time has never been better to explore them; in some cases you may be among the first to do so.

Colombia has a very privileged location on the continent and even on the planet. On the one hand it is equatorial, with all the richness of flora and fauna the tropics represent. However, it also comprises extensive coastlines from two separate oceans. Moreover, the three divisions of the Andean cordillera and their river systems cross over almost all of the national territory, completing the park system's wide spectrum of temperature zones, from the oppressive heat of the beaches to the icy peaks of the Andes. Within lies an incredibly varied network of ecosystems: The temperate cloud forests and páramos of the central cordillera, the hot savannas of the eastern plains bordering Venezuela, the placid coral reefs of the Caribbean coast, the humid rainforests of the Amazon, the whale breeding grounds of the Pacific coast, the perpetual snow of the Andes. Varying figures put the landmass under protection at either slightly less or more than 10% of the country's national territory, plus approximately 1.3% of its territorial waters. The total national park territory is proscribed within 56 protected regions that stretch from the Pacific and Caribbean oceans to the mountains of the Andes, and the spectacular Amazon jungle beyond.

The full range of this remarkably diverse climate and topography may occur even within the boundaries of a single park. Paramillo, located a mere eight hour drive from Medellin in the Andean region zooms up from near zero to a towering 3,960 meters above sea level, and ranges in temperature from 3 to 27 degrees Celcius; Cienaga Grande de Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast near Barranquilla has the largest coastal freshwater system in the world, comprising 100 lakes over 730 square kilometers; many host in situ remains of extinct indigenous civilizations, such as the Lost City of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta located within the mountainous backdrop to the Caribbean coast. Others including Serrania de Macuira are currently occupied by isolated indigenous tribes, such as the Wayluu or Kogui, all of them fully functional as distinct societies.

Colombia’s national parks occur in all its departments and regions, and are best approached from the capitals of those regions: Cartagena or Barranquilla or Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast; Bogotá and Medellin in the Distrito Federal and coffee zone (eje cafetero); Buenaventura on the Pacific coast; Leticia in the Amazonas region of the extreme south; Cali and Popoyán and Pasto to the southeast. You can jet around these various destinations easily for less than $100 per round trip. Try VivaColombia.

The really great thing is that in addition to the immensely popular parks on the Caribbean coast and around Bogotá, Colombia offers the traveler an opportunity to go a little further afield and have a genuine ecotourism adventure, in a place where they’re not likely to see other tourists at all, without incurring any real risk to body and soul. All that’s needed is a little extra preparation and a lot of patience. Of course there are some, many in fact, which I wouldn’t recommend to anybody, either for safety reasons or just lack of access. The remote parks are at various stages of organization for ecotourism, ranging from really terrific to non existent. Many remain virtually inaccessible. For example Orito, which straddles the wild and rugged departamentos of Putumayo and Narino bordering Ecuador, has no road access at all. Air service from Colombia's major cities can get you to Puerto Asis, which is close as the bird flies, and there is a kiosk with a telephone at El Libano. Park permits are required and rarely issued, owing to the sensitive culture of the Cofán people who inhabit the park, and the pristine flora which hosts a range of medicinal and spiritual plants harvested by them.

Perhaps equally difficult to reach, if not more so, is Cordillera de los Picachos which straddles the Meta and Caquetá departments in the southwestern cordillera of the Andes. Travel from the capital city of Huila is over rivers and by mule (three hours) and foot (eight hours) to la antiqua hacienda de Andalucia. However, once arrived the visitor is treated to spectacular 300 meter waterfalls and virgin forest, plus some unique geology. The ancient pre Cambrian rocks of Picachos comprise the western limit of South America’s 2 billion year old Guyana Plate, similar in fact to Venezuela’s Mount Roraima featured in H.G. Wells famous novel of lost worlds. Some unique species have evolved within the ancient sinkholes here, independent of the surrounding ecosystems. Here too is found plant species such as Psychotria viridis, a shrub of the coffee family known by the Quecha name of chaqruy ("to mix"), and whose juice is used locally as eyedrops for the homeopathic treatment of migraine headaches. Psychotria is also part of the admixture in the brewing of ayahuasca, owing to its hallucinagenic properties. Some parks such as Cahuinari in Amazonas have never had their flora and fauna properly mapped at all. Botanists have relied on folklore and hearsay to guess what species are there.

The National Parks Office has a beautifully illustrated website which unfortunately isn’t very helpful since much of the information is restricted or unavailable in English. The photography however is excellent! The author posts frequent updates on Colombian national parks on the website [www.parkscolombia.com](http://www.parkscolombia.com).

**Rutas Colombia!**

The indispensible guide to *driving* through Colombia should you wish to attempt it is the *Guia de Rutas* (rutascolombia.com) which has detailed tourist maps of each town and city plus all the interdepartmental highways to and from every popular destination in the country. You can pick up a hard copy of the guide at any tourist agency. The guide is referenced in this ebook.

[](http://www.rutascolombia.com/)

[www.rutascolombia.com](http://www.rutascolombia.com)

Also included are brief descriptions of certain medicinal plants used by Colombia`s original inhabitants, most of which are still in use today, and common birds which may be easily spotted.

**Where to start**

The central office of the Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia has an excellent information service at Carrera 10 No. 20 - 30, Bogotá, open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday. Maps, books, photograph and exhibit displays and personal trip/itinerary planners are available. Spanish only. Check here for special permits and news on access and closures.

Aviatur, LAN, and Satena all sell tour packages to the most popular parks including the islands of Providencia and San Andres, the high Sierras of Santa Marta, and Tayrona on the Caribbean coast. You’ll have to fly Satena, the national airline, to get into the remote parks near the borders with Ecuador and Venezuela. They don’t have packages per se, but can hook you up with ground transport to get you into the field. Their websites have English translations but unfortunately these aren’t as informative as the Spanish editions.

If you want to visit the more remote areas you'll need to rely heavily on the locals for information and services. The good news there is the vast majority of Colombians, something like 99.9% of them, are extremely honest, polite, and friendly in the old world sense. When the buskers board the buses to panhandle they always say "good afternoon', and the bus riders answer back as one, "good afternoon". In Bogotá this is called rollo behaviour, or cachako. Very old school.

However, your lack of Spanish will be a problem. Unlike Costa Rica and Chile, where many speak a bit of English, and badly, only educated people in Colombia speak it (and very well in most cases!) You have to keep that handicap in mind when you go running around the jungle.

The national parks system is administered by the National System of Protected Areas, the Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas, or SINAP, in Spanish. You'll see those initials on official park literature and websites. SINAP was established after Colombia signed the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity through Law 165 of 1994, and represents its primary activity in that regard. The park designations and boundaries are intrinsically woven into the country's hydrology conservation plans because the major river systems criss cross them. The areas of the park system supply 25 million people with fresh water.

The National System of Protected Areas, many with special designations by international agencies, comprise fauna and flora sanctuaries, nature reserves, unique natural areas such as Los Estoraques, protected communities of campesinos or indigenous tribes, called resguardos, some of which are merely within the vicinity of a park or adjoining it, and one vía parque, or 'road park'. Not all are open to ecotourism; some require special permission, and road access may or may not be available. However, even the most isolated have administration kiosks or cabañas, some with overnight accommodation for those intrepid travelers who make it that far.

There are currently several proposals for new park areas, and at least one which appears to have been lost to economic interests: the Serranía de San Lucas. This is a very high (2,600 meters) forested massif with a rainforest ecology that includes large monkey and bird populations. It also has large deposits of gold, emeralds, nickel and mercury. AngloGold Ashanti has been exploring in the area since 2004, causing tensions with local small-scale miners. The ELN guerilla group has enforced forest protection in the area since the early 2000s, ostensibly to protect local hydrology. The area is still subject to fighting between drug cartels, FARC, ELN, the Black Eagles and the Colombian army. It is located in Bolivar, an oddly shaped department which stretches north along the Andean corridor from the coffee district to the Caribbean Sea and west towards Panama. I wouldn’t advise going there. There are currently 37 mining licenses on 89,341 acres of parkland, according to the National Mining Agency.

Colombia has a long tradition of rebellion, going back to the 1948 murder of popular socialist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogota by a right wing extremist. In fact, the face of Fidel Castro appears in black and white behind the illustrious leader on the Colombian 1,000 peso note.

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*Fidel Castro (in B/W) on a 1,000 peso note*

## Origins

The country took the first steps in 1960 when it created the first national park, La Cueva del Guácharo in Huila province (guácharo is Spanish for a species known in English as the oilbird). Today, it comprises 56 protected areas covering more than 12.5 million hectares. The park system has the added mandate of preserving both the country's fresh water system and the culture and habitat of the human populations living within it, many of whom wrest their living from the forest or the sea.

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*Caribbean coastline, near Barranquilla*

Approximately 75% of the country's lakes and natural springs, or ciénegas, and 62% of its aquifers are located within the system's boundaries, supplying fresh water to some millions of Colombians . The full variety of these fresh water sources are found within the park system as well including the glaciers of the Andean range, the large extensions of the páramos or sub alpine regions, or páramos, which absorb and regulate the flow of water and where the country's great rivers are born, and the tropical rainforests which are an integral of the perpetual rain cycle. Moreover, entire communities of African Colombians, indigenous peoples, and campesinos, all of them distinctly different, rely on the continued preservation of the parks' in situ biodiversity and infinite genetic resources for food and medicine supply. Colombia's natural reserves are is in every sense living parks that are home to countless species including humans. The following lists the four park regions: Caribbean, Andes, Pacific, and the Amazon.

**Amazonia** - the southern part of the country whose highlight is the low altitude and covers the majority of tropical rainforest.

**Orinoquia** - extending from and through the north east of Colombia to the Venezuela border, and including the Rio Orinoco. Its extensive savannas are known nationally as the 'llanos orientales', or eastern plains.

**Region Andina** -corresponds to the Colombian portion of the Andean cordillera which broadens out into three north-south trending ranges in the south of the country, and hosts variable climate zones up to and including the snowy peaks of the mountain ranges.

**Region Caribe** - covers the coastal plains of the Colombian Caribbean and its offshore islands , plus the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta which rises above the geographic plain in the extreme north. This isolated mountain range comprises the highest peaks in the entire country, including the highest - Concavo - at 5,200 meters (17,060 ft.) above sea level.

**Region Pacifico** - comprising the coastal lowlands of the Colombian Pacific coast and its islands, plus the Serrania del Baudo mountains which equal the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in altitude, and are also distinct from the interior Andean ranges.

**Region Insular** - this is an island group distinguished by their distance from the shore, and therefore not considered coastal. They are more oceanic, including San Andres and Providencia in the Caribbean, and La Isla de Malpelo in the Pacific.

From the perspective of biodiversity, Colombia is an unrivalled smorgasbord of climates, plant and animal species, and rugged geography.

## Orientation

Locating north, south, east, and west is challenging because Colombia has an odd shape, with five international borders and two coastlines. It has 32 provinces, or departments, of varying shapes and sizes, and one of these, **El Chocó**, even straddles both the Pacific and Caribbean. Populated regions are known as *municipios* or simply *veredas, pueblos*, or *pueblitos*.

Colombia is more of a loose confederation of culturally, economically, and socially distinct regions than a country. So trying to pin down a consistent season among them is next to impossible. Some *Bogotanos* refer to summer and fall, but they are really talking about the dry and wet seasons. Even those have been mixed up from recent weather phenomena like *La Nina* and *El Nino*. It’s more accurate to say Bogota has four seasons per day!

Many parks are only accessible during the dry season which is typically January, February, and March but varies from region to region. In fact the Amazon parks have two: January to March, and June to August. Parks are often closed due to the weather. As of March, 2013, the parks open to the public were **Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta,Tayrona, Serrania de Macuira, Isla Salamanca, Rosario, Los Flamencos**, and **Los Colorados** in the **Caribbean** region. The latter two require permission from local authorities, a mere formality. Contact the *Organizacion El Sanctuario*: Henry Redondo at ph: (301) 675-3862, Hernan Diaz, (313) 514-0366, or Tania (300) 548-9281. In the Andean region only **Cueva de los Guacharos, Chingaza, Los Nevados, El Cocuy, Iguaque**, and **Galeras** were open. On the Pacific, you could visit **Utria**, and the newly designated **Bahia Malaga** as of August. I found none of the parks in the Amazonas region open as of March, 2013.

## THE CARIBBEAN

Pristine beaches, high mountain ranges, sub alpine forests and the country's two highest peaks, jungle, saltwater marshes teeming with birdlife, ancient cities, and desert are all within striking range of the three coastal cities here: **Cartagena, Barranquilla**, and **Santa Marta**.

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*Cartagena by night*

You can easily cut along the Caribbean Highway, or *troncal*, by bus all along the Caribbean coast, from the *Darien* to **Cartagena** and **Barranquilla** and **Santa Marta** and beyond to the Sierra Nevadas and the dusty **la Guajira** desert, which includes some great beaches and even greater parks. The distances between the coastal cities is short, two hours from Cartagena to Barranquilla, and another two to Santa Marta, and there are mini buses, or *busetas*, that hit all the spots between. These are both frequent and cheap, about $3 or $4 a ride, and you can flag them down and get them to drop you off too. Along the way are numerous truck stops, all of them offering fresh sea food and comfortable, cheap ($10 per night!) accommodation. It's a bit like the Gulf Coast in the southeastern U.S. Travel in these areas is safe, but avoid traveling to remote areas at night alone. Some tiny neighbourhoods outside the cities and towns can be dangerous at night but it's extremely unlikely you'll end up there. In any case the locals will be glad to tell you which to avoid.

The most popular parks on the basis of visits are **Corales del Rosario**, a day trip from Cartagena, and **Tayrona**, which includes a series of beaches along the Caribbean coastline beyond Santa Marta, plus its rugged backdrop called the **Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta**, considered the highest coastal mountain range in the world. The Sierras are distinct from the south-southwest trending Andes, and contain the country's highest peaks. They also host the *Ciudad Perdida* (the lost city), a fascinating remnant of the indigenous civilization that once flourished here, accessible with a gruelling five day hike (three days up and two down). Both parks are located on the Caribbean shore of the dusty plain which borders Venezuela, called La Guajira.

## Rosario and Providencia

Corales de Rosario is Colombia's most touristed national park, a series of coral islands a day trip from the famed colonial capital of Cartagena. Part of the Rosario Archipelago which includes thirty islands, the park measures some 19,000 hectares and offers spectacular white sand beaches and coral diving/snorkeling. Rosario stretches southwest into the Caribbean from the **Baru Peninsula**, (some call it an island!), itself an hour or so from Cartagena. There are countless day tours by road and boat from there. You'll find numerous white coral beaches, restaurants and hotels, dive shops and tour agencies on and around those islands, and in fact all along the coast from Cartagena. Baru is rather touristy but its proximity to the site of the wreck of the *San Jose* is intriguing: The Spanish galleon was part of a fleet of treasure ships being chased by the British towards Cartagena in 1622 when it mysteriously exploded and sank about 200 nautical miles to the southwest of Rosario. An inventory of the San Jose’s cargo was never found, and ownership is currently under dispute by American treasure hunters and the Colombian government.

The San Jose’s location is well known but diving it is out of the question since it lies about 700 feet below the surface. But you might find a few souvenirs around Baru if you know the right people. If not from the Jose, then from another wreck. There are reportedly 1,000 of them off the Colombia’s Caribbean coastline.

## Old McBean Lagoon

(Much!) further offshore into the Caribbean is **Old McBean Lagoon**, on the island of Providencia, which with San Andres and Santa Catalina comprise the furthest reaches of Colombian territory into the Caribbean Sea. The entire island chain has some 5,000 inhabitants, descendants of puritan English settlers and former African slaves. *Interesting culture!* The more popular tourist destination is the main island of **San Andres** located a two hour flight from Bogotá or an hour from Cartagena. **Providencia** and McBean are a 20 minute flight or eight hour boat trip from there.

**

*PNN | Marcela Cano foto*

McBean is a series of cays with dry tropical forest, mangroves, and abundant coral. There is no real infrastructure, merely simple accommodations offered by locals. July to December is the rainy season. It’s ideal for hanging back and doing a little diving, feasting on sea food, and just generally getting into the Caribbean groove.

The main island of San Andres is well developed but Providencia/McBean is right out of a Somerset Maugham novel. Sea and sand and Sadie Thompson, the slow moving tropical fan ... *well, you get the picture*. It’s a coral zone dotted with very lightly inhabited cayes. Mangroves, dry tropical forest, real life characters speaking 19th century Creole, or Caribbean English. The lagoon forms a tiny insular ecosystem, Colombia’s only offshore Caribbean park, and measures some 995 hectares in total (905 hectares of it marine). Its coral, mangroves, and low dry forest cover are best seen from **Iron Wood Hill** on the Island of Providencia, and there are 3,000 meters of trails along the lagoon and the *Sea of Seven Colors*, so-named for the various coral beds and sea grass at the shallow bottom. Tiny **Crab Cay** at the other end has its own trails and rentable kayaks for short trips to the reef and over the lagoon and **Oyster Creek**, plus some great places to suntan. Imagine having those white coral sands and crystal clear aqua-blue waters to yourself! Diving and snorkelling is available at Crab Cay, and at **Hippie Place** further out.

Most of the park is a watershed whose waters feed the four species of mangroves. It’s also a snorkeler’s paradise, with shallow depths of clear water and abundant hard and soft and sponge coral hosting diverse species of fish: pargos, parrot fish, spiney lobsters and spectacular queen conches (strombus gigas). Local fauna include Iguanas and Penny and Jack lizards plus a fascinating little blue lizard resembling a chameleon, called *Lagarto Azul*. Birds you’ll see are the man ‘o war, also known as the magnificient frigatebird (*fragata magnificens*), which nests in the volcanic caves, and various species of bats including an endemic one.

You’ll find the dry tropical forest at Iron Wood Hill, with the mangroves forming a kind of a red border at the shore and around the lagoon. The interior of the cayes is mostly black mangrove. Crab Cay has ample *icaco* and *cocoplum*, a salt-tolerant shrubbery with leathery leaves that grows 10 to 20 feet high over sandy areas and prevents shore erosion. It also produces a fruit which is popular among the islanders along with coco palms and mango trees. There are large sea grass beds bordering the coastline.

The park is best visited from January to June, and March is actually the driest month. It has a small emergency hospital, and is eight hours by boat or 20 minutes by air from San Andres or Providencia. The marine portion of the park at Crab Cay is accessible only by boat, though the adjacent islets are off limits to tourists. Various trails lead through and around the 48 hectare forests of Iron Wood Hill.**Three Brothers Cay** is another place of interest along with the aforementioned Hippie Place. A four day five night visit is recommended with accommodation provided by islanders.



*Lagarto Azul*

## Los Colorados

This flora and fauna sanctuary some 90 kilometres south of Cartagena is the last refuge for many species of the dry forests of Colombia's Caribbean coastline. It also has a well-treed, mini mountain range rising to 420 meters above sea level, a unique feature of this zone. Some of the 105 tree species here can reach up to 50 meters high.

**

*Cork forests*

Tucans, guacamayas or macaws, colorado monkeys, and deer are found within the park, also a strategic point for migratory birds traveling between north and south. There are two interpretative trails, and accommodation can be found in the adjoining pueblo of **San Juan Nepomuceno**. Remnants from the 16th century *Malebu* inhabitants such as petroglyphs and iron tools believed to have fallen from the sky have been located in the park's boundaries. Many indigenous beliefs and practices involved the homeopathic use of plants which are found among the small mountains of the park.

**Access**: Take the bus from the **Terminal de Transportes** at Cartagena to San Juan Nepomuceno, a two hour trip. The locals will help you find budget accommodation (about $10 per night) and the park office where you can arrange transportation to the park and a guided tour for about $2.50 per person (yes, seriously!).

## El Corchal "El Mono Hernández"

The number of joined marshes here are ideal for wildlife though a bit awkward to get to. Named for Colombian naturalist Jorge Ignacio "El Mono" Hernández-Camacho (1935–2001), known as *el sabio* (the wiseman), who died of a heart attack in the park. He was founder of the natural park system. Access is by boat from Cartagena, or along a river system in **Gambote**, Bolivar state, or by 4-wheel drive from the Caribbean highway. Five species of mangroves cover half the area, the only place where pure forests of cork are found. A wide range of birds feed in the surrounding waters, plus the endangered *West Indian Manatee*. Jaguars, brown caimans, and howlers are also found. There are trails open from December to April. The park guides at Los Colorados and/or Corchal can help you make travel arrangements from Cartagena or Los Colorados.



**Birds**|El Gallito de Ciénaga, *the Wattled Jacana*, is likely found in any saltwater marsh. Jacanas are wetland birds with huge feet and claws for walking on floating vegetation in shallow lakes. They have a range of noisy rattling calls and live on insects.

## Isla de Salamanca

The is one of the so-called **via parques**, so named for their accessibility at the roadside; in this case the Troncal del Caribe rimming the shoreline from Cartagena to Santa Marta. Salamanca is actually a group of islands in the Caribbean delta of the **Magdalena River**, one of the country's big three river systems which adjoins Barranquilla at the mouth. Tropical, located on 56,000 hectares at sea level, and featuring mangroves, semi dry tropical forest, and fresh water marsh. Accessible by public transport from Santa Marta or Barranquilla. Hosts 199 bird species and 33 species of mammals from 14 families, and 140 species of fish. Great for birdwatchers. December to April is the dry season, the best time to go, but ironically the worst for birdwatching.

You can reach it by bus from Santa Marta, or from the sprawling coastal city of Barranquilla, which is closer. There is signage on the highway and the park office is open daily. You'll find one interpretative beach trail there, **Los Cocos**. A better bet is arrange a canoe guide for a nominal fee to take you through the mangroves to view the birdlife.

**Birds** |Flamenco Rosado (*phoenicopterus ruber ruber*), the American Flamingo, is closely related to the Greater and Chilean Flamingos, and the only one to naturally inhabit North America. It's seen in great numbers along the Caribbean shore east of Barranquilla during the rainy season when the *cienagas* (spring fed lagoons) open up to the sea and fill with spawning shrimp. Also prevalent in the tropical shrublands here is the Cardinal Guajiro (*cardinalis phoeniceus*), or Vermillion Cardinal. **The Pato** **Cuervo,** or *longuillo*, is a black cormorant. The **Chavarria**, or *northern screamer*, is named from a Greek word which means spongy or porous and makes reference to the air sacs under the bird's skin. A large water bird, it has impressive colouring; red around its eyes and black plumes over the crest, with and rose-coloured feet. The sides of the head and throat are white.



*Cardinal Guajiro*

## Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta

A little further along the troncal from Salamanca is this UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, a labyrinth of waterways lying among the accumulated sediment from the Magdalena River, and comprising the largest mangrove forest on the Caribbean coast. The Sanctuary contains over 100 swamps and man-grove forests, marshes, rivers, creeks and mudlands. Many vertebrates now extinct in other places find refuge in this park.

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*Ciénagas are large fresh water lagoons*

Accessed by boat from points stemming from Santa Marta or Barranquilla, or along river systems flowing into it from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Rainiest in October and November.

**Note**: You can easily find boat operators to take you across the ciénaga and hit the main attractions. Inquire at the parks office at Isla Salamanca. The preceding parks are great for naturalists and birdwatchers with an interest in aquatic fowl, or for anyone who wants to walk quietly through the forest without encountering tourists.

## Tayrona

Going east from Cartagena towards Santa Marta you'll encounter the tourist herd heading into the spectacular Tayrona and Sierra Nevada parks. These two are part of an overall biosphere located on a peninsula trending northeast towards Venezuela which sustains some 50,000 *Nogui* and assorted other indigenous cultures including the *Arawak*. The Nevada range itself is a distinct southwest trending range which is not part of the Andes, although it does host Colombia`s two highest peaks.

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*The Nogui live within and without Tayrona Park | PNN Photo*

Crescent-shaped Tayrona Park is the beach side to these two parks, where tropical jungles tumble down to the sand and sculpted stone of its semi-arid beaches. The fabled snow-covered peaks of the high Nevadas are the backdrop, connected to Tayrona with countless trails and creeks or *quebradas*. Tayrona is set up for tourists with plenty of campgrounds and semi-luxurious eco-villages; numerous trails take the visitor through indigenous villages and past interpretative centers and over beaches. However, these are vast areas and the distances between their various attractions can be short and/or long and arduous, depending on your physical condition. They are easily found and traversed however. The urge to hike from the beaches of Tayrona along the countless trails or riverbanks to the Nevadas above should be resisted. It`s not as safe or as short as it looks.

Tayrona is located on 15,000 hectares approximately 34 kilometres from Santa Marta, the city port where Simon Bolivar died, along the Caribbean Highway, and accessible with local transport. Elevations are from sea level to 900 meters. Tayrona offers beaches, mangrove swamps, coral, three kinds of forest cover (dry, humid, and cloud), and fresh water streams issuing down from the backdrop of peaks and nevados, or snows. There is a park entrance fee of 35,000 Colombian Pesos, approximately $17 USD.

There are two main park entrances, both easily accessible from Santa Marta: **El Zaino**, with access to the beach at *Cañaveral*, and the 40 minute jungle hike beyond to Arrecifes, *Cabo San Juan de Guia* (the tiny indigenous village of Pueblito is a one hour hike from here), and *la Piscina*. The other entrance is **Palangana**, located at the small town of **Calabazo** about 12 kilometers from Santa Marta. It's a one hour hike from here to *Pueblito* and the town of *Chayrama*, and another hour to the beach at *Cabo San Juan de Guia* and *Neguanje, Gayraca*, and *Playa Cristal*.

Of particular interest is the town of Pueblito, inhabited by the white-robbed Nogui people. This is the most representative of the indigenous towns in the park, with its expansive terraces, angularly-formed stone retaining walls, and carved flagstone pathways.



*Kogui people. Santa Marta*

**Birding in Tayrona** | Tayrona has some 300 bird species according to the official PNN guide. These include the Aguila Blanca (*leucoptermis albicollis williaminae*) which is merely the good old fashioned American Bald Eagle You'll find its aeries among the lofty peaks of the Sierra Nevada range. The El Paujil (*crax alberti*) was an important symbol in Pre-Colombian culture, with many gold figures dedicated to it and now available for viewing at the Museo de Oro in Bogota. However, a local population was only located in 2003 in the Magdalena Valley six hours from the capital. Bird conservators including the American Bird Conservancy and ProAves have purchased its habitat there, some 3,000 acres of lowland forest. Other bird species worth scouting for are in Tayrona are: La Pava (*penelope purpurascens brunnecens*), a long-tailed, speckled bird with a red throat, also known as a crested guan; two species of Soisola found in both dry and humid forests at the lower elevations under 1,300 meters: Plus La Guacharaca (*ortalis garrula*), El Rey Galembo (*sarcoramphus papa*), and El Atrapamoscas Real (*orchorynchus coronatus fraterculus*). The definitive source on Colombian birding is undoubtedly Steve Hilty who authored an exhaustive book on it. You can find more information on birding tours in Tayrona and elsewhere in Colombia at [VENT Birding.](http://www.ventbird.com/)



*Photo: El Paujil (conservationbirding.org.).*

## Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

This is a mountain biosphere of 383,000 hectares located behind Colombia's Caribbean coast and bordering Tayrona. Accessible from the aforementioned port of Santa Marta, in Magdalena Department, along paved and unpaved roads through the heart of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, which is distinct from the Andes and comprises the country's two highest peaks: **Colon** and **Bolivar**, reaching 5,775 and 5,560 meters respectively.



*PNN | Foto Danilo*

Elevation is from sea level to an astonishing 5,775 meters above it. Tropical to freezing temperatures, sub Andean to Andean jungle and forest, páramo (alpine tundra), and super páramo. There are five and eight day hikes to **Ciudad Perdida**, a ruined indigenous city predating Peru's Machu Picchu. Home to the *Kogui* people who have inhabited the region since colonial times and have preserved their own language: *aseemee-sally-dew* means how are you?

The park entrance at **San Lorenzo** is 42 kilometers from Santa Marta, 25 of which are paved. The route is Santa Marta via **Minca**, **El Campano**, and **Cerro Kennedy** to San Lorenzo and takes about three hours. *Sierra Nevada is a hiker's paradise*. However, the most distinctive characteristic of the park, in addition to its physical features, are its people, who number some 50,000 from various tribes including *Kogui, Arhuaco, Wiwa*, and *Kankuamo*, and live within three protected areas, or *resguardos*, which you will probably not encounter as they tend to be quite a distance from the touristed areas of the park. These people continue to live in accordance with a rather complex series of cosmological beliefs which govern their interaction with nature, in traditional houses for one or groups of three, and delimited by stone walls or fences of dry branches or reed. There are also communities of campesinos on the fringes of the park who farm and raise livestock.



*Arhuaco mother and child*

The *resguardos* are off limits to tourists by special request of the inhabitants, apart from the Ciudad Perdida (elevation of 1,700 meters) which is administered by a government agency, called ICANH, or the Instituto Colombiano de Antropologia. However you can learn more about them at the **Experimental Station** in San Lorenzo, at the entrance to the park. The park's numerous trails offer the best chance of really getting in among the local flora and fauna. There are four, ranging from 3 to 5 hours in walking time, and from easy to difficult grades.

**Trails**

**Laguna**: Medium, 3 hours. Visit the *Laguna Sagrada* (sacred lake), observe the subAndean forest and views of Santa Marta, Cienaga Grande and los picos Nevados (snowy peaks).

**Quebrada San Lorenzo**: Medium, 1.3 hours. SubAndean Birds and flora, a 15 meter waterfall.

**Cascada del Nacimiento del Rio Gaira**: Difficult, 5 hours. A 30 meter waterfall and panoramic view of the forest.

**Teyuna**: This is the three day hike up (and two down) to the Ciudad Perdida, or lost city. There are five guide organizations which offer all inclusive excursion hikes to the site, with varying prices. You’re supposed to have a guide but the great thing about Colombia is nobody ever stops you from jumping the fence, as it were. Find your way to **Machete Pelao** via **Guachaca** on the Caribbean Highway and leave from there.

**Medicinal** **plants |** Abalazos is the Colombian name for a flowering plant species (*monstera deliciosa*) found throughout the rainforests, and known in Central America by the Aztec name of Tzapote, or sweet fruit. It contains citric acid, glucose, and an aromatic substance which smells somewhat like the mature guanabana fruit. A bitter-tasting alkaloid called *aronia* whose chemical formula has never been determined is found in its juice. The leaves are used locally in the treatment of *anasarca*, a widespread swelling of the skin caused from liver or renal failure. A tincture prepared from the juice is used in Brazil for the homeopathic treatment of breast cancer and mastitis | *Source: Plantas Colombianas, Su Applicacion Medicinal. By Mauro Hernandez Mesa. Copyright 1992 by Biblioteca Banco Popular*

**Birds** | San Lorenzo on the northwest coast of Sierra Nevada is a natural lookout with views of the vast **Cienaga Grande** freshwater lagoon to the east of **Barranquilla**, the **Bahia de Santa Marta**, and the rugged inland mountains. It’s also a sanctuary for most of the park’s bird species. These include the condor (*vulture griephus*) and the small green parrot known as La Lora Serrano (*pyrrhura viridicata*), which you will probably see if you visit there. If you have a guide it’s worth enquiring about a radio program of the same name which is broadcast by and for the indigenous tribes who inhabit the Sierras. Much of the content focuses on animal lore and recent sightings and other information thanks to the tireless efforts of a local carpenter and wildlife rescue volunteer named Albert Mariño.

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*SanLorenzo |La Lora Serrano*

**Northeast of Sierra Nevada**

The herd thins as you head beyond Tayrona and Sierra Nevada toward the town of **Riohacha**, a jumping off point for excursions into the la Guajira desert, and the remoter beaches of **Cabo de la Vela** and **Los Flamencos** and **Puenta Gallina**. These are popular adventure destinations which appeal to those who don`t mind going a little further afield and getting off the beaten path. You will encounter other tourists there, but not many, and most are with various organized tours which involve overnight camping and 4 X 4`s.

## Los Flamencos

Los Flamencos is over 7,600 hectares of dry and humid tropical forest and mangroves, located midway between Santa Marta and Riohacha. Access is at Camarones some 20 kilometers from Riohacha, or 2.5 hours (165 kilometers) via the Troncal del Caribe from Santa Marta. Locals there will ferry you from the Visitors' Center across the Boca de Camarones. There are cabañas at the center and those same boatmen can ferry you among the mangroves of the park. About 1,500 indigenous people live within its scattered communities including Cari Cari, Perico, and Boca de Camarones.

The National Park Guide describes Los Flamencos thus, *"...one of the spectacles to be enjoyed are the bluest skies and uninterrupted quiet of the La Guajira peninsula, interspersed with the intense pink that revolves in spirals above the lakes of the sanctuary"*. The pink is from the countless flamingos which feed on the fish and crustaceans of the marsh.

**Birding** | Still with the Tayrona region, you'll also stumble on the La Guacharaca (*ortalis garrula*), also known as the Chestnut Winged Chachalaca, which is found only in Colombia within subtropical or dry forests, and even degraded forest cover. The El Rey Galembo (*sarcoramphus papa*), or King Vulture, is an impressive sight with its grey and white plumage and red circled eyes. It's the only surviving member of its genus. El Atrapamoscas Real, or Mosquero Real, (*orchorynchus coronatus fraterculus*), is a strange mixture of cardinal and woodpecker, only smaller and with a spectacular fanned head crest. Each plume comes to a black point bordered with violet blue. They are found everywhere, feeding on butterflies and whatever insects they can snatch from the air.



*King Vulture | Gallito de Cienaga |*

## Serrania de Macuira

This lesser known, but spectacular, park on the Caribbean is located on the eastern extremity of the **La Guajira** peninsula. **Macuira** is a tiny cloud forest known as the high Guajira, perched in the middle of the dusty escarpment which borders the Caribbean Sea and Venezuela's western frontier.

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*Wayú woman and baby*

Size is 25,000 hectares, 85 to 867 meters above sea level, with an average temperature of 27 degrees Celcius. Home to the **Wayú,** who believe the biosphere was created by a wind spirit known as *Jepirech* and (most importantly in any oasis) a rainy offspring known as *Igua*. The Wayú belong to the linguistic tribe of **Arawak**, who came from the Amazon jungles centuries ago.

The Wayú, half of whom live in Venezuela, never formed communities with tribal chiefs or caciques, and consequently never fell victim to the conquistadores since there were no leaders to corrupt. Instead, they have a caste system comprised of clans, or *Apüshii*, and based on matriarchial lineage.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Park is the presence of the *evergreen cloud dwarf forest* (which seems to be perpetually closed to tourists!), and very similar in appearance to the Andean forests located in the much higher páramo, or subalpine. Macuira is only 550 meters above sea level, and just five kilometres from a semi-arid desert.

There is no public transport to Macuira. Access is via the town of **Riohacha**, which has an information center, and from there across the peninsula to the border town of **Macao**, about two hours away. From Macao you get a taxi to an indigenous town called **Uribia** (currently enduring drought conditions) where an open truck leaves once a week for the nine hour trip to **Portete** and the subsequent 115 kilometers along secondary roads to the park entrance at **Nazareth**. The route is impassable in the rainy season from October to December.

A potentially better route is to cross from Macao to **Maracaibo** in **Venezuela** (or take a direct bus from Santa Marta or Cartagena, about 10 hours) and by local transit to **Castilletes**, where you re-enter Colombia and travel to **Siapana** and Nazareth.

There are tour operators who offer 4x4 overnight excursions into La Guajira from Riohache and Uribia, but unfortunately for anyone who wants to spend a decent amount of time at Macuira they tend to be blitz tours of certain key areas. If you opt for one make sure you specify that you wish to spend some time exploring the park and they might make special arrangements for you. One good source is *ETN Taganga*. Call Jose (he speaks English) at 420-0047, or email etnotaganga@gmail.com.

However, there is plenty to see in la Guajira apart from Macuria and despite its desolate appearance: The windswept beach at **Cabo de la Vela**, the northern headland at **Punta Gallina** and **Bahia Honda** further on; the shifting desert sands at **Las Dunas de Taroa**, the salt flats of **Salinas de Manaure**.

**Trails**

Once at Macuira you`ll find seven easy trails ranging from 1.5 to 7 hours in length:

*Siapana/Nazareth*. Seven hours crossing the mountain range to Siapana where the Wayú offer accommodations, handicrafts, and traditional food.

*Mirador de Mekijano*. An hour and a half from Nazareth, with commanding views of the serrania and a Wayú ranch that offers accommodation. There are also small lakes for swimming.

*El Chorro de Ipakiwou*. From the lookout at Mekijano it's a easy one hour ascent to a natural rock wall deemed to be the mythical Princess Makuira, who according to legend was turned to stone and condemned to eternal weeping, the tears of which form the crystal waters seeping from the rocks.

*El Medano-Alewouru*. Three and a half hours from Nazareth is an enormous sand dune considered one of the landing sites for the mythical god Mareiwa.

*La Batea de Kajasshiwou*. An hour by vehicle or three by bicycle, and an agreeable four hours by foot from Nazareth, is a spring fed waterhole for bathing.

*Cerro Itojoro*. A two and half hour steep climb to the top, with views of Nazareth, the sea, and the interior of the park.

*Kalal*. Three hours from Nazareth is a Wayú ranch with accommodation, also a permanent water source and sacred site where the nature spirit Pulowi is believed to reside.

**Birds** | The park fascinates naturalists because it forms a kind of bio-geographical island isolated from other biosystems and forests by a wide semi desert. Of the 140 bird species recorded there, 17 of them endemic and 20 migratory, are the cucarachero, or bicolour wren; a beautiful blue songbird of the tanager family called the Azuejo Nectarivoro (*cyanerpes cianeus gemmens*), or Red Legged Honeycreeper; plus the Fringilido Vireonido (*Arremon Schegeli Fratruelis*), Mirla (*Turdus Leucomelas*), and Barranquero (*Momotus Momota Spatha*).



*Red Legged Honeycreeper*

## ANDES REGION

Colombia's greatest number of parks are found within the Andes mountain range which bisects the country and trends to the south-southwest.The main Andean range splits into three more or less parallel, north-south oriented mountain ranges: the western, central, and eastern cordilleras. These are isolated by two long and low valleys, the Cauca between the western and central cordilleras, and the Magdalena to the east. To the northwest lies the Chocó, one of the world’s most biologically diverse regions, and to their east, the Amazon basin. The eastern cordillera is the longest and widest of the three, extending from just north of the equator to the Caribbean coast. It peaks out at 5,500 meters, and has an average ridgeline of 2500 meters.

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*The páramos are watersheds*

The ecology and landscapes of these high and low mountain ranges, their páramos and sub páramos, are the dominant features of the Andean parks. These include the rocky peaks and promontories and glacial fields and lakes of the so-called high Andes, plus the lush temperate cloud forests or even semi-tropical jungles of the lower elevations, or sub Andean ranges. In between, and of great importance to both indigenous and urban peoples, are those highland plains, the *páramos*; watersheds of the cities and the spiritual home of various tribes who continue to live within and without them. The páramo is basically a kind of sub alpine moor, the ecosystem extant above the trees and below the permanent snowline. It is a neo-tropical, high mountain biome of giant rosette plants, shrubs and tussock or bunch grasses. The sub páramo bordering the forests below has a wider variety of plantlife; shrubs, scattered trees, thickets, herbs and the like. Among these are the *frailejones*, a kind of short, ubiquitous tree shrub with a thick trunk and hairy, succulent leaves; the *espeletia grandiflora* and colourful *sietecueros* flowers. The dry, dead grasses and low shrubs are prone to wildfires and easily damaged by human occupation, particularly potato growing. Great care is taken in their protection.

## Catatumbo Bari

Catatumbo is located in the north of the eastern Andes bordering Venezuela, in the department of Norte de Santander (capital: Bucaramanga). It hosts the typical virgin flora of the Andean subtropical forests as well as the Catatumbo river system. The last zone inhabited by the indigenous Bari people, Catatumbo has over 158,000 hectares ranging in elevation from 20 to 1,800 meters. To get there fly or take the bus from Bogotá to Cucuta on the border with Venezuela and travel three hours to **Tibú**. From there it's another three hours to **La Gabarra**, and by canoe up the Catatumbo River.



There are also river routes from La Gabarra, site of a 1996 FARC massacre. However, you can also cross the border from Cucuta to San Antonio on the Venezuelan side and charter a plane. It's not as expensive as you might think.

I've roamed this area on a few occasions, most recently with my friend Carlos Barrera, a former Microsoft engineer who now builds foot bridges in remote communities throughout Colombia. We spent a couple of days doing that last spring in **Ragonvalia**, located about two hours from the Venezuela border, between the Catatumbo and Tatamá national parks. Check out the [brief video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6T7EJJFEXQ4) of some of us horsing around there. You can catch up with Carlos via his [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/charlie.puentero?fref=ts) to see what he’s up to.

**Regional park Sisativa**

An alternative to Catatumbo is the regional park called Sisavita, located on 11,000 hectares at 1,845 to 4,232 meters above sea level, about 100 kilometers southwest of Cucuta. It hosts high Andean forest and páramos, part of the much larger (150,000 hectares) Santurbán watershed region with some 40 lakes. Community activists here and elsewhere in the municipality of Cucutilla, led by Professor Francisco Araque, waged a successful 10 year battle against Canadian gold miner Greystar Resources to have the region designated the first natural regional park of Norte de Santander. He received a Planeta Azul (blue planet) award for his efforts in 2009. Park entrance can be arranged in the town of about 11,000 residents who will glad to welcome you. Those with a social conscience may consider visiting this town and park and supporting their efforts.

In fact, both Norte de Santander and its sister region of Santander are great travel destinations, though often overlooked by travelers. The people are reputedly gruff but I find them very genuine and welcoming. The capital of Bucaramanga is one of my favourite cities in Colombia, and the colonial towns such as **Giron** nearby are charming.

**Birds** | La Perdiz Montanera (*odontophorus columnianus*), the Buffy Crowned Wood Partridge, has a loud rollicking, repeated whistle. Found in underground and small openings in humid and cloud forests. Look for it in any Andean region between 1,000 to 2,800 meters above sea level. Measures about 33 centimeters and weighs approximately 350 grams. Perdiz montanera looks like a cross between a pheasant and a chicken.



*la perdiz monanera*



*Colonial town of Giron, Santander*

## Cueva de los Guácharos

Approximately 9,000 hectares, between 1,630 and 2,840 meters above sea level, and with a temperate climate averaging 16 degrees Celcius. Named for the Guácharos, noctural Birds which inhabit an extensive cave system. Located between the southeastern part of the department of Huila and the southwest of Caquetá, home of the recently-discovered (2010) Red Bearded Titi monkey (Callicebus caquetensis), currently endangered because agriculture has cut up its habitat. Crossing open areas by ground is dangerous for small monkeys.

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*Guácharos are cave Birds*

The park is hydrated by two rivers which feed the Magdalena, one of the country's five major river systems, and which bisects the country from the Caribbean to its southern border. Apart from the Guácharos are found 300 species of Birds, 50 of butterflies, and many mammals including the spectacled (anteojo) bear. Accessed by land from the coffee growing center of Pitalito, or the capital of Neiva via Acevedo, along unpaved roads and trails. Numerous nature hikes take the visitor to the caves, past waterfalls and along rivers. Cloud forest and páramo (alpine tundra system), with one of the last intact oak forests in the country.

To get there travel from Neiva, the capital of the department of Huila, to Acevedo, the northeast limit of the park. To reach the visitor's center you need to go from Pitalito to Palestina, and by unpaved road to la vereda (community) La Mensura, then by foot over the La Cascajosa river to the western edge of the park.

**Birds** | El Buho (*aegolius barrisii*), is the Buff Fronted Owl. Small, short tailed, and broadwinged. Nocturnal. Found in open mountain forests. El Buho can be identified by its quavering trill which sometimes varies in pitch.

**Medicinal plants** | Adonis | A perennial plant 10 to 30 centimeters high with feathery, finely divided leaves. Their flowers are red, yellow or orange and have 5–30 petals. According to legend, the goddess Venus transformed the wounded Adonis into a flower of the same name, leaving a drop of blood on each leaf. Adonis is known to work as a diuretic, and acts on the circulatory system and particularly the arterial pressure on the heart. A tincture prepared from the whole plant is used to combat water retention, valvular heart disease, or the improper closing of the heart`s tricupsid valve, and cardiac asthma, the coughing or wheezing which is symptomatic of congestive heart failure

## Puracé

A volcanic region straddling the Cauca and Huila departments, including the Purace volcano (active: Last eruption 1977) and fringing the colonial city of Popayán. A watershed and birthplace for Colombia`s four major rivers: Cauca, Magdalena, Patia and Caquetá. Approx. 83,000 hectares, at between 2,600 and 5,000 meters above sea level. Average temperature is between 3 and 18 degrees. The park is situated close to San Agustine, an historic center of indigenous culture, the remains of which are found locally in megalithic stone statues and petroglyphs. Colourful thermal springs (owing to the petrified lava), lakes, and trails including a difficult seven kilometer ascent of the volcano. Flora belongs to the alpine and high alpine tundra region, including Colombian pine, oak, and palms, plus some 200 species of orchids, and spotted deer, spectacled bear, and pumas, tapirs, and condors. Purace is home to fully-functioning and named indigenous communities such as Kokonuko and Guachicono, and some 5,000 campesino families - all of them legally recognized as park custodians. Accessed by three land routes from the colonial city of Popoyán in Huila.

**Birding** | El paujil Copete de Piedra (*pauxi pauxi*) or Helmeted Curassow, is found in the eastern Andes of Colombia and also Venezuela. The male and female are similar, with only a slight difference in size. Formerly classified as a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN, and upgraded to endangered in 2008. Diet is seeds, fruits, insects and small animals.



*Pauxi pauxi. Photo Greg Hume*

**Medicinal plants** | Bejuco de paloma (*gonolobus macrophyllus michx.*) grows in both humid and temperate forests, from 900 to 2,000 meters above sea level. From the family of perennial herbs and twining shrubscalled *asclepiadacea*. Bejuco means vine, and paloma is pigeon, but the plant is also known as the toad vine in Colombia or even *condurango*, the Incan name meaning blood of the Condor. The first to recognize the plant was don Pedro Guerrero, the archbishop of Granada in 1693, plus various latter day scientists including Dujardin Beaumetz, who mentioned it in his Diccionario de Terapeutica y Materia Medica. Medicinally, the milk of the vine is used against wrinkles and tumors, and to ease tooth aches. The dry leaves reduced to powder are believed to heal sores and its fresh leaves are decocted as a bath mash for treating neuralgia and rheumatism. Tinctures from the fresh plant matter of gonolobus and administered in low dilutions have been used to calm pain from stomach cancers, against lupus and siphilis and putrified ulcers, and breast cancer.

## Munchique



A mountain located in Cauca department, on approximately 47,000 hectares, with eastern views from the summit of jungle, mountains, deep canyons, and beyond to the blue Pacific and island of Gorgona, also a national park and popular diving destination. Hydro resources are considerable, with 30 rivers and creeks and some 40 rapids and waterfalls. Multiple rivers flow into the larger Micay river system which flows in turn towards the Pacific Ocean. Low jungle, and Andean and low Andean forests are present in the park, which ranges from 500 to 3,000 meters above sea level and has temperatures from 6 to 28 Celcius. Accessed with daily public transport from Popoyán. There are numerous interpretive trails.

**Birds** | El Guacamaya (*ara sp.*) The genus name *ara* is likely related to *arara*, the Portuguese word for a macaw, itself derived from the Tupi word *a'rara*. The Ara macaws are large striking parrots with long tails, long narrow wings and vividly coloured plumage. They all have a characteristic bare face patch around the eyes. Males and females have similar plumage. Many of its members are popular in the pet trade, and bird smuggling is a threat to several species.

**Medicinal plants** |*Barniz de Pasto* grows five to eight meters high, from a family of flowering plants known as *rubiaceae*, many of them commercially viable such as coffee and quinine. The medicinal ipecacuanha (*carapichea ipecacuanha*), which is known in Brazil as ipega'kwãi, or *duck penis*, by the Tupi Indians, also stems from rubiaceae. Barniz is found in the temperate rainforests and has small, white flowers and capsular fruit. It is also known as *arbol de cera*, or *mompa*. The Pasto and Quillacinga Indians extract the resin from its tender buds and chew the soft, gluten-like substance until it is sticky and eventually hard, for use as an adhesive to wood. The cortex of the tree is cooked and administered to fight malarial fevers, popularly in the region of Pasto, located in the shadow of the giant **Galeras** volcano in the department of **Narino**, and **Timana** municipality in neighbouring **Huila**.

## Nevada del Huila

At 158,000 hectares, this splendid mountain park spans three departments -- **Huila, Cauca**, and **Tolima** – and offers some of the best views in the central cordillera and Andean range, and the country's second biggest glacier after *El Cocuy*. You can get there easily by road from **Cali, Popoyán**, or **Neiva**, the capital of Huila department: From Cali or Popoyán via *Santander de Quilichao*, and then the *Caloto-El Palo-Tacueyo* route to the camps at Polaco and Colombiano. These are an eight hour hike below the snowline. From Neiva it's a three hour drive to Jerusalen, via Palermo-Santa Maria. You'll find a cabin 15 minutes from the highway.

The 'nevada' or snowy mountain range of Huila is an active volcano system that is high risk and under constant surveillance. At 2,600 to 5,360 meters above sea level it is cold, with Andean and high Andean forest, plus alpine tundra, or páramo, flora and fauna. The ecosystems have been unfortunately fragmented due to unmanaged farming and harvesting over the years, leaving much of the oak, Colombian pine, palm, comino (cumin), and coralito de páramo vegetation at risk. Three excellent interpretative trails at under 3,000 meters elevation take the visitor along 2.5 kilometers where they can see everything. Check with the parks office for openings, routes, and travel advisories (see appendix for contact details). There is also a 40 kilometer hike from the town of Toaz on Highway 37 to the volcano but access is usually restricted due to volcanic activity. Check with San Agustin travel for details on that.

The park overlaps in places with local indigenous communities, or resguardos, and sites deemed sacred by the Nasa-Paez people. **Gaitania** in Tolima department is one such, along with **Toribio, Tacueyo**, and **San Francisco** in the north of the park (Cauca department), plus a handful of others. The reguardos are both within and beyond the park in various municipalities throughout the Cauca, Huila, and Tolima departments. Also within the zone of influence (principally in Huila and Cauca) are communities of campesinos who practice *pancoger*, or subsistence farming. A small community of Afro Colombians exists in the municipality of **Páez**, Cauca. Visitor contact with the people of the park is unlikely, as tour groups are steadfastly directed away from them. However, various NGOs and federal agencies are engaged in the evolving social organization of the park's residents, and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Cali has become a center of further study with excellent resources.

There are three trails in the forest reserve, two in the Palma de Cera sector and another at El Roble, some 2,500 to 2,750 meters above sea level. These trails traverse 2.5 kilometers of Andean forest ecosystems, and high Andean subpáramo ending at an observation point. Each is about an hour's hike. The dry season is January to March, and June to August.

**NB.** The park is currently closed due to heightened volcanic activity; you may get close to it however by having a guide bring you to one of the campesino communities or *resguardos* on its fringes.

## Cordillera de los Picachos



Part of a triumvirate of bordering natural parks including *Sumapaz* and *Tinigua*, the latter connected in turn with *Macarena* along the banks of the river **Duda**. This forms a series of protected humid alpine and cloud forest ecosystems from the country's eastern cordillera in **Meta** department to the jungles of the high **Guaviare** River, in the south central Andes. The temperature ranges from hot to cold, anywhere from 5 to 23 degrees Celcius. Permanent fog, located 250 to 3,800 meters above sea level. Mountainous. The rocks here are among the continent's oldest, similar to the famed Mount Roraima of Venezuela on the borders of Brazil and Guyana, one of the oldest geological formations on Earth dating back 2 billion years. The caved-in sink holes in these mesas support flora and fauna found nowhere else, and those too vary from hole to hole.

The flora and fauna are widely dispersed from the Andean, Amazonian, and Orinoquia regions. The two rivers within the park, the Guayabero and Pato, drain into the Amazon and Orinoco systems. Rainy, averaging 5,000 mm per year. The mountains are covered with virgin forest and 300 meter waterfalls. Amazon jungle, Andean páramo, and mountain forest ecosystems. Accessible from **Neiva**, the capital of Huila department, by road, mule (five hours) and on foot (eight hours). There is no park infrastructure, but food and lodging can be arranged with the campesinos who live within the park's zone of influence.

## Farallones de Cali

Farallones means cliff faces in Spanish, and these are seen as blue peaks from the capital city of Cali, (pop. 2.5 million) in Cauca department. Alive with rivers, measuring over 200,000 hectares, and rising from 200 to 4,100 meters in elevation. Temperatures range from 5 to 25 degrees Celcius. High and sub alpine humid forests and páramo. The river Anchicayá which has its headwaters here is classified as having among the world's widest variety of bird species. There are three visitor centers, each accessed from different routes into the park: El Topacio, from Cali, on the banks of the river Pance; El Queremal on the Anchicayá River, via the old highway from the Pacific port of Buenaventura; and Quebradahonda, along the river Cali. Historically unsafe due to the presence of FARC and paramilitaries, recent years have seen increasing numbers of visitors. Steven Hilty studied the region while gathering data for a Guide to the Birds of Colombia (1986).

**Birds**| The solitary eagle (aguila solitaria) is widely distributed throughout Latin America though populations are sparse. You have a fairly good chance of finding it circling high above the Farrones de Cali. Look for it in the humid, densely wooded foothills between 600 and 2,200 meters above sea level.



*Solitary eagle*

**Natural medicine |** In the rush to condemn sugar most have forgotten its original uses. Sugar in various forms was cultivated and used homeopathically and also medicinally by the Calimas who inhabited Colombia's lush Valle de Cali in pre Colonial times. Unrefined whole cane sugar, called panela, is still brewed daily throughout Colombia in huge quantities as a kind of sweet tea; and the cane is used as a distilled alcoholic beverage called cachaza. Both are known to naturopaths: Cachaza was mixed with aguardiente (rum) and knocked back neat to treat gonorrhea. Panela was used historically to disinfect ulcers and wounds by applying a poultice of shavings to the wounded area to absorb toxins. Useful in treating contusions, gaseous gangrene, and bone infections, or osteomyelitis. There are numerous other health uses for derivatives of sugar cane, which are readily available in the campesino markets of Cali, Medellin, and Bogota.



*Placita de Florez, Medellin*

**NB**. Three of the best places to find raw medicinal plants are in Bogota at the *Plaza Mercado de Siete de Agosto* at Calle 67 and Carrera 24 and *Paloquemo* at Calle 19 downtown, and in Medellin at *Placita de Florez* off La Playa between Calle 50 and Carrera 43.

## Las Hermosas



Extraordinarily beautiful high alpine and cloud forest, from 1,600 to 4,200 meters above sea level, temperatures of 1 to 21 degrees. Home to more than 300 mirrored lakes ranging in size to 44 hectares. Accessible by road from Ibague, the capital of Tolima, and accommodation is available within the park for small groups up to eight persons, from the park attendant. Private accommodation can be found in the towns within the park`s zone of influence. Archeological evidence found within the nearby town of Chaparral suggests the páramo was used as a sacred hunting retreat by indigenous people transiting the park.

**Birds** | La Urraca Azul (cyanolyca viridicyana) is a white collared jay found in humid highland forests. Largely blue and have a black mask. They also possess black bills and legs and are skulking Birds. They frequently join mixed-species flocks.

## Sumapaz



The Sumapaz páramo (154,000 hectares) has an inhospitable, cold climate with temperatures averaging below 10 degrees, and altitudes of 3,500 and 4000 meters. Rainy almost the entire year, except from December to February, when the sunlight reaches a peak, with intense ultraviolet radiation. Considered a sacred place for the Muisca aboriginal people, where the humans were not supposed to enter. Even so there is evidence of pre Colombian human settlement which disappeared after the arrival of the Spanish. The park lies between the two main fluvial systems of Colombia, the Orinoco and Magdalena river basins, and provides tributaries to both. Numerous lakes with colourful blue-green algae in the alpine tundra regions, and the world's largest uninterrupted páramo, or alpine plain. No park infrastructure, though there is a trail to Chisacá Lake with an observatory. Accessed by road four hours from the capital city of Bogotá to Usme, and thence by unpaved road for two hours to the park entrance at Chisacá .

## Chingaza

This is the watershed for the Colombian capital of Bogotá, located on the banks of the river Orinoco, and the nearest Andean park to the city. Located an hour away to the northeast of Bogotá, among the western cordillera of the Colombian Andes, and straddling the departments of Cuindinamarca and Meta. Temperatures range from 4 to 21 degrees Celcius.

Glacial lakes, such as Siecha and Chingaza dot the landscape while permanent fog shrouds the rounded mountain tops. Here one can see the emblematic flora of Colombian's highlands brought together in glorious union with the mossy pines and wildflowers of the Andean alpine.

Chingaza is uninhabited, while those living beyond the park's 76,000 hectares are self-governed campesinos with unique social and cultural organization. Four major trails lead the hiker to viewpoints and within sight of 180 bird species, dry lakes, wildlife including spectacled bear and puma, and an exotic assortment of plants including eight species of moss, and the distinctive and spikey leafed frailejones and colourful sietecueros flowers of South America. Accessed an hour’s ride from Bogotá by the Bogotá-Fómeque or the Bogotá-La Calera-Piedras Gordas road; both are paved and in good condition and day trips from Bogotá are readily available. The park's administration center is at Monterredondo. December to March is the best season to visit.

The park's numerous trails offer the best chance of really getting in among the local flora and fauna. There are four, ranging from 3 to 5 hours in walking time, and from easy to difficult grades.

**Trails** | There are three viewpoints: The Arboleda, with a magnificent panoramic view; La Ye, with its vista of Chingaza lake; and Mirador de los Condores, a zone where giant Condors were released in an attempt to reintroduce the species.

*Suasi*: 2.4 kilometers through three ecosystems, medium difficulty, observe mammals, amphibians, insects and Birds of the páramo.

*Laguna Seca*: an interpretive trail a 40 minute drive from Monterredondo, the characteristics of the páramo and water cycles.

*La Arboleda*: 20 minutes by car from Monterredondo, a short trail which illustrates the change from high Andean forest to páramo, continues to the Mirador de los Condores.

*Lagunas de Siecha*: a half hour from the municipality of Guasca, via Paso Honda, 4.5 kilometers long with the Siecha lakes, creeks, trails through the páramo, and craggy viewpoints.

**Birds** | El Colibri (*coeligena helianthea tamae*), the blue throated starfrontlet, is known in Spanish simply as the hummingbird, whose family it belongs to. Found around Bogotá and environs including the Calderas highlands immediately west of the city, and Chingaza National Park, and the neighbouring departments of Boyacá and Cundinamarca. That puts it in the vicinity of the sub alpine páramos and the high Andes. **La Torcaza** (*columba fasciata*) is commonly known in North America as a band tailed pigeon. **El Carpintero** (*dryocopus lineatus*), a large red headed woodpecker, is commonly found in forest borders and other open woodland. Though not generally a mountain bird, it has been seen in the Colombian highlands. Common but wary, its call is a ringing *wic-wic-wic*. Both sexes drum. Often confused with the crinmson crested woodpecker which has a similar plumage and size. though the female has white shoulder lines which meet on the back in a V shape, and the male has a completely red head.



El Carpintero (*dryocopus lineatus*)

## Los Nevados

This is one of three parks with access to the high alpine of the Colombian Andes. The others are El Cocuy to the northeast and Nevada del Huila to the southwest. All are located within the three south-southwest trending cordillera of the Andes.

Los Nevados is somewhat different because it begins at a higher elevation, and is substantially smaller than El Cocuy. The average stay here is three days, versus the full week recommended to see El Cocuy. Also, daily public transit is available from the city of Manizales to the infamous Ruiz volcano, which erupted in the 1980s and wiped out an entire town of 25,000 inhabitants.

Located on 58,000 hectares and dominated by the 5,300-meter high Nevado del Ruiz, Los Nevados is the country's third most popular park. Even though the altitude ranges from 2,600 to 5,300 meters above sea level, tourists frequently make the mistake of arriving in sneakers and t shirts. Bear in mind that the average temperature here is 8 to 13 degrees Celcius. Try and arrive during one of the two dry seasons, December and January, and July and August.

The landscape is mostly scrub, bogs, dense bush and lakes as well as super páramo, or sub alpine regions. The area above the treeline is called alto Andino, with the perpetual snow of the nevados, or snow caps. Nevados is strategically important as it supplies drinking water to 37 municipalities in three departments and also regulates the water supply to agroindustries in the country's Magdalena and Cauca river valleys.

**Getting there**

NB. The northern sector has been closed due to activity from Ruiz, whose activity level was elevated in the spring of 2012 to amber, a level three warning, and just one step from evacuation. As of March, 2013 however, the Brisas-Valle de Las Tumbas (kilometre 5) route has been opened to limited traffic from 8am to 3pm, Thursday to Sunday. There is a $20 per day entry fee.

If you have a car and plan an extended stay you can leave via Pereira or Manizales, two of Colombia's triumvirate of cities in the coffee growing district, or eje de cafetero: Manizales to Murillo (43 kilometers), and another kilometer from the fork (watch for signage) to the Refugio Brisas, the park entrance. The visitor center at El Cisne has overnight accommodation. From Pereira the route is to El Cidral, and by 7 to 9 hour hike to Otun lake (Laguna del Otun).

A third option is to ascend the immensely popular Nevado del Tolima from the Tolima capital of Ibaque. You'll pass through Juntas, Restrepo, and Pastales, where you leave your vehicle and spend the night at the ranchero at El Silencio, and scale the nevado the following morning.

You can also arrive via the popular tourist destination of Salento, about an hour`s bus ride from the city of Armenia. That's a three-day camping hike through the Valley of Cocora with it`s fabulous mile high Wax Palms (*Ceroxylon quindiuense*), the páramo of Pomerales, and Paramillo de Quindio at 4,800 meters above sea level. Spectacular scenery!

The parks office advises: *It`s important to note there is no access to the Refugio sector, the glacier or the snowline. Visitors may still view the transition of páramo to super páramo, and the panoramic view of the interglacial valley*.



*Wax Palm. TravelNationalGeographic.*

**What to do**

Biking, hiking, camping, and rock climbing. For walkers there are seven points of interest at various elevations above 3,900 meters. Bear in mind that this is very high. You'll be constantly short of breath and may experience headaches and mild nausea from altitude sickness. Go very slowly once you get above 3,000 meters. Along the *Refugio del Ruiz, Cisne, Conejera, Otun*, and *Bosque del Eden* circuits you'll have commanding views of mountains, glacial lakes (*Verde Encantada, Otun*), snowy peaks, (*Santa Isabel*), waterfalls, and forests (*Bosque del Eden*).

The mountain biking trails here are long, some quite steep, and all at a very high elevation. They include: *Villa Maria-La Cueva*, (57 kilometers at 1,850 to 4,150 meters); *Brisas-El Cisne-Potosi*, (40 kilometers at 4,050 to 3,959 meters); *Brisas-Villamaria*,via Telerana, (97 kilometers at 1,850 to 4,050 meters); *Brisas-Refugio*, (10 kilometers above 4,000 meters); *Brisas-Villamaria,* via La Cueva and Playa Larga, (84 kilometers at 1,850 to 4,050 meters); and *Brisas-Murillo* (44 kilometers at 3,950 to 4,050 meters).

Rock climbers will find numerous challenges in the *Chalet Arenales* sector, and ice hikers can traverse the *Glacieres de Neridas, Recio, Azugrado,* and *Lagunillas*. Guides and gear are available at **Manizales, Murillo**, and **Brisas**.

## Pisba

Located in Boyaca, one of Colombia's 32 departments and among the original nine. Pisba is in the eastern cordillera, bordering Bogotá's Cuindinamarca department and extending to the Venezuelan border. It forms a corridor with El Cocuy to the northeast. Known for its colourful red and orange lichen, and the yellow flowering *senecio vaccinioides* which grow a meter and a half high.

Pisba is known historically for a famous crossing by **Simon Bolivar** and **Francisco de Paula Santander** (who had two departments named after him) after the revolution of 1810 was repulsed by the Spanish. The armies suffered great privation along the way from cold, hunger, and the constant rain. History buffs can pick up his trail at **Socha Viejo** and repeat the sojourn to **Soldier Lake** where Bolivar is said to have stayed.

**Birds** |El Tucan (*andigena nigrirostris*), the Black Billed Mountain Tucan. Consider yourself lucky if you spot one of these. Not that they’re particularly rare, just extraordinary looking. The only mountain Tucan with a white throat is found in the humid highlands of west, central and eastern Colombia; from Cauca to the Magdalena valley in Huila, the eastern slope of Putumayo and Nariño, and Cundinamarca (Bogota) and west to Caquetá. Found in evergreen forests at 1,600 to 3,200 meters above sea level, and to 1,200 meters on the Pacific slope and the east slope of the East Andes.



*Black-billed Tucan*

**Medicinal plants** | Hoja Santa is a viney plant about five feet high with fleshy leaves and green, tubular flowers wreathed in pale red. The ‘holy leaf” plant arrived with African slaves who used it traditionally to stop bleeding. It was also widely used by Bolivar’s troops during the wars of independence, and in fact came to Colombia from Venezuela. The plant is known throughout South and Latin America by various names including leaf of the witch, leaf of the soldier, leaf of the air, the devil’s marvel, or simply behind the door. In Brazil it’s called coirana. The plant is incredibly vital. It thrives even when driven into the walls of peasant dwellings, growing roots and stems in profusion and lending structural strength. H. Pittier mentions it in his Manual de las Plantas Usuales de Venezuela (Caracas. Fondacion Eugenio Mendoza. 1926, 1971). Oddly, the plant appears to have daily moods, being observed as acidic in the morning, tasteless in the afternoon, and bitter at night. This has been attributed to various levels of disoxygenation. Its leaves applied to open wounds have a hemostatic effect, and applied freshly to the head induce a sweat that alleviates migraines. According to folkloric sources a brew of 10 to 500 grams plant matter/to water taken four times daily clears up chest and respiratory infections.

## Tamá

Named for the now extinct language of the Tucanoan language of Colombia, as spoken in Caquetá Region. Borders Venezuela, with Norte de Santander department to the west. Temperatures are warm to cool. Humid jungle and high Andean forest, 350 to 3,450 meters altitude, and temperatures from 5 to 25 degrees Celcius. Tamá is currently off limits to tourists due to guerrilla activity.

## El Cocuy

A mountaineer’s paradise with glaciers, perennially snowcapped peaks, rocky promontories, mountain villages, and some of the best climbing and rappelling in S. America. Cocuy is a day`s sojourn from Bogotá and rife with well-marked trails, the easiest ones adjoining a small town, and the longer ones involving overnight treks of four days or more.

The temperature ranges from -10 to 20 degrees Celcius within a variety of climate zones including the cold of the high Andes and its more temperate forests. The park measures 306,000 hectares, containing more than 80 rivers, and a series of perpetually-snowed peaks from 4,800 to 5,330 meters high. Access is from **Bogotá** to **Tunja**, a couple of hours, and past several small towns to **Soata** where the road divides. Both routes lead to **Güicán** and the town of **El Cocuy**, where locals are struggling to make a living from tourism. You can get to either on regularly scheduled buses from Bogotá which arrive in the evening or early morning. Rely on local guides to get you into and around the park. You can also rent a vehicle and scoot around its perimeter.

Güicán and El Cocuy are separated by 43 kilometers of road with three easy points of access to the park which are ideal for the non hiker: **The Valle de Lagunillas** to the south, and **Hacienda La Esperanza** and **Ritaku`wa** to the north.

Day trips to El Cocuy are next to impossible unless you park yourself at the town of El Cocuy and make individual forays over a number of days. You may as well venture into the park and stay at its staffed cabins and villages. The food is good. The western frontier has two dry seasons: December to March and June through July. The rainy season on the east side is from April to November.

**Trails** | The following trails are all steep, and take more than eight hours to traverse from, and back to, the visitor's center. Pack water and expect mild headaches from the altitude (+4,000 meters above sea level)

**Ruta alto de la Cueva -Pulpito del Diablo**: It's nine kilometres from the visitor`s center to la Cueva and about five to the perpetual snow, or *nevado*, of Pulpito.

**Laguna Grande de la Sierra**: Difficult, eight hours there and back.

**Ruta de los Ritaku'wa**: You can overnight at the cabañas at Kanwara and Playitas.

**Lagunillas-Laguna de la Plaza**: Between eight and 12 hours there and back, nine and 20 kilometers respectively.

**What you`ll see**

A line of peaks up to 5,330 meters are visible from the road well before the park. They’ve been described from the air as looking like a rosary of white pearls, a range approximately 30 kilometres long and spanning the departments of Boyaca, Arauca, and Casanare.

It`s worth asking your guide if you can get to one of the resguardos of the park, or failing that, one of the campesino villages with mixed indigenous populations. There are five which belong to the ancestral *U`Wa* people of El Cocuy: *Unido de U`wa, Angosturas, Sibariza, Valles del Sol*, and *Laguna Tranquilidad*.

Some of the ethnic U`Wa practice subsistence agriculture, tend livestock, and grow orchards. They are among the last of the *muisca* or *chibcha* people of what is now Bogotá and environs, and greatly valued by park naturalists for their knowledge of how its various ecosystems interconnect. Some live traditional lives, while others are mingling with the campesino communities.

The easier mountains are the picos nevados (snowy peaks) of **Ritaku`Wa, Pan de Azucar, El Castillo, Pulpito del Diablo**, and **Concavos**. Plus the lakes **Los Verdes, Grande, La Isla, La Plaza, El Avellanal**, and the hotsprings, or *termales*, of **Güicán**. Mountaineers can continue on over the sierras between between **San Pablin** and **Conocavito** to climb **El Paso de la Silla**, or from **Campanillas** and **Pan de Azucar** to the **Campanillas**.

## Paramillo

Páramos, hot to cold (3 to 27 degrees Celcius), from 100 to 3,960 meters above sea level, on 460,000 hectares. An eight hour drive from **Medellin**, capital of Antiochia, via **Ituango**. January to March, July to August are the best times to visit, though you'll need permission from park officials to do so.

Birthplace to the San Jorge and Sinú rivers which flow some 400 kilometres and through Cordoba into the Caribbean. Tropical jungle, páramo or high subalpine moors, flood plains, sub Andean and Andean cloud forests. There are two tribes resident within the park boundaries: About 440 families of the *Embera-Katios* live in the resguardo, a restricted zone, of **Yaberaradó** on the Sinú`s higher elevations, and live from hunting and fishing and mostly agriculture. They live in single family dwellings near free-flowing water sources, and some distance apart.

## Las Orquideas

On the western slope of the west cordillera, accessed from the Antiochian capital of Medellin. Orquideas is considered a center point for the shift from Central to South American ecosystems, and particularly flowering plant life. About 32,000 hectares, temperatures of 18 to 24 degrees Celcius, and elevation of 300 to 3,080 meters above sea level. Main attractions are the park`s splendid orchids and trees such as the Andean oak. Accessed by traveling five hours from Medellin to **Urrao**, and another two to the park control center. From there it`s a multi hour hike or mule ride to the *Venados* and *Calles Cabañas*. The park has no eating/accommodation facilities or mapped trails. It is presently closed due to paramilitary activity on the road from Santa Fe, a colonial town and popular tourist destination approximately 50 kilometres from Medellin.

**Birds** | The Amalfi municipality just 100 kilometers north of Medellín is home to several recently described new Colombian bird species, such as the Chestnut Capped Piha (*Lipaugus Weberi*). Confined to a small area of forest on the northern slope of the Central Andes, its numbers are believed to range around 2,500. They’re mostly found between 1,600 and 1,750 meters above sea level. Others there which are new to science include Stiles’s Tapaculo and Parker’s Antbird, both fairly common to the region.

**Medicinal plants** | Coffee in Antiochia is believed to have vasoconstrictive properties. As an analgesic it is used locally for treating migraines by reducing inflammation of the pericranial vessels. Something infinitely more interesting however is *hongo sagrado*, or the hallucinogenic mushroom. The author of Plantas Colombianas, Mauro Hernandez Mesa, wrote of his own experience with hongo sagrado with a shamanic guide in the colonial town of [Girandot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girardot,_Cundinamarca), Colombia, in 1929, thus: *"I had a vision of Guatama Buddha, which I attributed to a manifestation of the subconscious having read recently The Light of Asia; this vision disappeared and I returned to normal but feeling like I was floating in space with my head touching the ceiling of the arbor where we were, as though I would perforate it. What followed was the most painful: A worker split some wood for the fire, and I identified with the splinters in such a way as to feel with my body the damage the hatchet had done to the wood. Forondo (the guide) understood this and stopped the chore. It was as though I was in a deep slumber but perfectly lucid which I didn't experience with datura arborea and yagé."*

Latin America's psychedelic mushrooms have a long, illustrious history. Ancient records portray the pre Colombian Aztec emperor [Nezahuacoyolt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nezahualcoyotl) of the city of Huehuetlapallan as an avid botanist who compiled a book, the Teomoxtli, that classified Mexico's mushrooms into two genuses: The nanacame were harvested from meadows, and tlazolnacatl grew as tree parasites. Of these, the psychedelic species were further classified as teyhunti. All were subsequently collected into a sixteen volume set by a physician of King Phillip II during a six year sojourn in Nueva Espana, and later kept in [Madrid's Royal Libary of Escorial](http://www.feelmadrid.com/elescorial.html). Though lost in a fire in 1671, fragments of the original volumes found their way into another 22 volume set, Historia Plantarum de Novae Hispaniae, published by the famed Spanish botanist [Casimiro Gómez de Ortega](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casimiro_G%C3%B3mez_Ortega) in 1790, later a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society. Peyote and hongo sagrado or teunamancatl are mentioned extensively.

A less objective view is that of Friar Toribio de Buenaventura (1490-1569) one of the first 12 friars to arrive in the Mexico of Cortes, and whose book Historia de los Indios de la Nueva Espana depicts the alleged murderous frenzies and hallucinations of Aztecs under the influence of psychotropic mushrooms.

A more reliable source is a Franciscan contemporary named Bernardino de Sahagún, whose [Florentine Codex](http://www.wdl.org/en/item/10096/) was written in the Aztec Nahuatl tongue with the friar's two Aztec students over a 30 year period. Scholars have called it the most remarkable account of a non Western culture in existence. Friar Bernardino collected very thorough accounts of indigenous culture from the Azetcs themselves, in pictograph form, which he had translated phonetically in their native language and later into Spanish. Rather than being part of some rarefied shamanic ritual the Codex depicts what appeared to be a widespread entheogenic practice of individuals. *"They ate the black mushrooms called nanacatl in the morning followed by honey to mask the bitter taste and commenced to sing and dance and even envision themselves well into the future, divining as it were their fate. Some saw themselves drowning or falling from great heights or plunging into whirlpools of water, while others foresaw a long life of peace and tranquillity. Afterwards they would discuss these visions."*

## Tatamá

Still on the slope of the western cordillera,bordering the eastern edge of the Pacific department of **El Chocó**. Located 2,000 to 4,200 meters above sea level,with cool to cold temperatures of 3 to 16 degrees. Accessible by highway from **Pereira**, the unofficial capital of Colombia`s central coffee growing district known as *Eje Cafetero* (or, swivel of the coffee growers). A high, lush mountainous region dominated by the brooding [**Ruiz de la Nevada**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nevado_del_Ruiz) volcano at **Manizales**. Accommodation for groups to 40 is available from locals who manage the economy of the park, at the visitor`s center in **Planes de San Rafael**. The government has been endeavouring to hand over management of the parks to local stakeholders (with mixed success), to create tourism revenue for the regions, stimulate employment, and ultimately make them self supporting.

Tatamá is a word which in *Embera-Chami* means grandfather of the rivers. Orchids, waterfalls, the flora and fauna of the páramo or sub alpine tundra including ant eaters.

**Birds** | El paujil Copete de Piedra (*Pauxi, pauxi*) or Helmeted Curassow is found in the eastern Andes of Colombia and also Venezuela. The male and female are similar, with only a slight difference in size. Formerly classified as a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN, and upgraded to endangered in 2008. Diet is seeds, fruits, insects and small animals.



*Helmeted Curassow*

## Selva de Florencia

Located in the department of Caldas, south of the *Paisa* region of **Antiochia** department, on the western slope of the central cordillera.Renowned for its pristine Andean jungle. Accessible by highway midway between Medellin and Bogotá, at **Dorado** and **Samaná** in Caldas department.

Temperate climate, averaging 17 to 22 degrees Celcius, with elevation of 850 to 2,400 meters on approximately 10,000 hectares. Fine assortment of flora and fauna including the endangered mico titi (*sanguinus*) monkey.

**Birds** | La Pava Andina (*penelope montganii*), a game fowl found at 1,500 meters above sea level or higher, in the Andes. El Gallito de Roca (*rupicola peruviana*) is remarkable for the scarlet headdress of the males. Also known as Andean Cock of the Rock, and found in the cloud forests. Gallito de roca is sexually dimorphic, meaning the male and female are distinctly different. Look for it in ravines and forested streams from 500 to 2,400 meters elevation.



*El Gallito de Roca | Cock of the Rock*

## Serranía de los Yariguíes

Cold, Andean forest, humid cloud forest, and páramo. Land area is 78,000 hectares offering great topographic variety, on the western slope of the eastern Andes which reaches its widest point here. The Serranía de los Yariguíes forms an isolated, northwest spur of the main cordillera and has the steepest slopes. Accessible from the highway between Bogotá and **Bucaramanga,** in **Santander** department bordering Venezuela. Very damp climate due to the fog from the **Magdalena River** which flows north-northwest to the Caribbean, and fosters the growth of rain forests through the semi arid páramo to the high Andes. Elevations from 850 to 3,200 meters. The park’s drier eastern sector is recognized as a sanctuary for nine bird species by the Area de Endemismos de Aves, (AEA), stewarded by [BirdLife International](http://www.birdlife.org/).

**Trails**

The 38 kilometre **Camino de Lengerke** is named for a German colonist who helped create the region’s cacao and coffee industry. Half of it passes through the park boundaries. You can pick it up at various points in the municipalities of **San Vicente de Chucuri** and **Zapatoca**.

You’ll see rich and diverse flora including *oak, caracole, guaque, monocoro* and about 37 other species of tropical woods at risk from overharvesting. Birds are the *pauxi pauxi, perdiz santandereana, hormiguero (*anteater*)*, and the endemic species *Capito hypoleucus,(*white mantled barbet*) Coeligena prunelli,* a kind of hummingbird, and a species of parrot known as *Pionopsitta pyhrilia*. Among the 88 species of mammals are chucas, tigrillo, jaguar, puma, and oso de anteojos, or spectacled bears. The local people are [*Yariguies*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yariguies)*,* who are said to have committed mass suicide rather than submit to the conquistadores.Others are *Xiriguanaes, Opones, Carares, Agataes*, and *Chanchotes*. All are hunter-gatherers and warriors, organized by independent clans with chiefs or caciques.

There are no communities inside the park, although petroglyphs may be seen at San Vicente de Chucuri and there is a legend about a vanished race, Socorro Viejo, that is believed to continue to exist somewhere within the region. The hiker will see several impressive waterfalls including **El Salto** at the municipality of Simacota where the trail head for **El Camino de los Conquistadores** leads to Santa Helena del Opon. The trail is believed to have current use by the Socorro Nuevo, the descendants of the alleged vanished tribe.

**Animals**

The park has a curious assortment of winged creatures steeped in folkloric beliefs including *el pájaro mojaculos*, or wet-assed bird, so called because it wets its tail in water. Also called the *libélula*. The repeated whistle of the *tres tires* is believed to precede a death in the village. The *avispa culiqueso* is a white-tailed-wasp, while its peer, the *avispa carnicera*, is known to eat meat, particularly that of snakes whose venom it is prone to carry in its sting. The butterfly known as sueños (dreams) are large and black and seeing one heralds an unexpected visitor, and la *hormiga difunta*, an ant species, is said to live in the *cajones* of the dead. Its cousin the *hormiga pelapuerco*, or porkhaired ant, is so-called because people are known to shriek from the pain of its sting while collecting them for pig food. The fish called *quinquín* is a white-ash colour with antennae at the back of the head that hurt when touched.

## Isla de la Corota

A turtle shaped island with a high Andean alpine lake. Smallest protected area in the Colombian park system. Located in **Pasto** municipality in the department of **Narino**, on the Pacific slope of the western cordillera. Accessed from kilometer 22 on the highway from Pasto to **Putumayo**, at **El Encano**. Considered a sacred site by the *Quillasinga* people and for Catholics who gather in a small chapel on the island every year to celebrate the Fiesta de la Virgen de Lourdes. People from Pasto are genuine, friendly folk who speak Spanish with a charming country accent.

**Birds** | La Gallineta de Monte (*nothecerus julius*), or moorhen. Ramon Paez in his Travel and Adventures in South America notes this nocturnal serenading bird as *“.. a most beautiful creature both in color and in shape, and not unlike a water-hen in general appearance : the eyes especially are peculiarly pretty, being of a brilliant ruby color and scintillate like fire. These birds sing in concert, and their song — a lively chatter — has a mystic fascination I am unable to describe. They are also considered delicate eating ; but unfortunately are very difficult to catch, for even after being shot, unless wounded in the leg, they can outstrip the swiftest hound, although their wings, being very small, avail them little. Nature, however, has provided them with long yellow legs for the purpose. The ponds and lagoons of the savannas are literally crowded with other individuals of the feathered tribe, whose lively notes and incessant chatterings contribute likewise to enliven the night.*





*Moorhen*

## Igaque

A sacred lake to the *Muisca* people who consider it the cradle of humanity, and from which came the mother goddess of people, known as *Bachué* in the extinct Chibcha language which remained banned by Spanish decree until 1991. Key words from the Chibcha language remain as place names throughout the department of **Cundinamara**, where the capital of Bogotá is today, and neighbouring **Boyacá** as well. The park is cold - from 4 to 12 degrees Celcius on average - and high, reaching an altitude of 3,800 meters above sea level. Located in the department of Boyacá, in **Villadeleyva** municipality, and accessible by road from the popular tourist city of the same name, via **Santuario**. Plenty of Andean flora and fauna, including Red Cinchona (*quinta*), valued as a medicinal plant for its high quinine content, particularly for treating the symptoms of malaria; a leafy shrub called Clusia (*las gaques*), and a small-leafed tree called *los encenillos*. There are also forests of *cedrillo* hardwoods*,* and *arrayan*, a popular shrub with opposite leaves, and plants such as *chaque* (*Vallea Stipularis*), a beautiful evergreen with masses of pinkish-red or crimson bell-shaped flowers. Iguaque is a veritable garden of the Andes!

Its early devotees, the Muisca people, were a confederacy of the central highlands of the eastern cordillera, divided by allegiances to three great rulers: The [*Zaque*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaque), centered in **Chunza**, ruling a territory covering modern southern and northeastern **Boyacá** and southern **Santander**; the [*Zipa,*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zipa) centered in **Bacatá** (Bogota), and governing most of modern **Cundinamarca**, the western Llanos and northeastern **Tolima**; and the [*Iraca*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaque)innortheastern Boyacá and southwest Santander.

## Guanenta Alto Río Fonce

Located west of the eastern cordillera, in the south of Santander department bordering Venezuela to the east. The park is a watershed for several rivers including the **Chicamocha**, which eventually passes through a famous canyon of the same name about 50 kilometers from the capital city of **Bucaramanga**. Cold and high, with an average temperature of 10 to 15 degrees Celcius, and elevation of 2,150 to 4,000 meters above sea level. Largest reserve of Andean oak trees in the country, very diverse wildlife including whitefaced monkeys and tapirs and the *tigrillo*, or little spotted cat (*leopardus tigrina*). Also six endangered bird species, many - up to 21 - registered with [CITES](http://www.cites.org/) (*Convención Internacional Tráfico de Especies*). Of Colombia's 87 species of *frailejonales*, a tall spiny-leafed shrub emblematic of the sub Andean páramo, 13 are found here. Also home to a type of gnarled, leafy tree called polylepis quadrijuga (*coloradito*), one of the few trees to grow well on inaccessible slopes among the matted grasses and tussocks of the high Andes.

A pair of trails, **La Rusia** and **La Sierra**, from two to four kilometres long, lead through fascinating high Andean terrain and past frigid lakes. Accessed by highway from the popular colonial town of **San Gil** via [**Charala**](http://www.sangil.com.co/). Camping and accommodation is available in various communities outside the restricted areas of the park.

**Birds** | El Aranero Pechigris (*basileuterus cinereicolis*) is the grey throated warbler. It feeds on insects from the low branches of trees in forests up to 1,800 meters above sea level, on both sides of the eastern cordillera of northern Colombia and western Venezuela. Often spotted while feeding, mixed with other species.



*Grey throated warbler*

## Otún Quimbaya

Designated a flora and fauna sanctuary (SFF) in the eco region of the Eje Cafetero, the prime coffee growing region between the city triumvirate of **Pereira, Armenia**, and **Manizales**. Known for the beauty of its landscapes. Elevation to 2,250 meters, with cool but humid forests and fog covered hill tops and *laderas* or *vertientes* (slopes). This is a small (489 hectares) but humid sub-Andean forest with a wide variety of spectacular flowering plants including orchids and bromelias plus butterflies, mammals, and birds such as the *pava caucana* now being brought back from near extinction by conservationists.

Interesting variety of flora and fauna owing to the number of introduced plant species growing within a small area. Also home to the *palma de cera*, the impossibly tall palm trees which dots the landscape and shoots above the forest canopy. Known as Colombia's national tree. The *Quimbaya* people are indigenous to a larger zone incorporating the park and bordering the departments of **Quindio, Risaralda**, and **Caldas**. Linguistically *Karib*, they are renowned silversmiths (*orfebreria*). The nearby community of **La Suiza** is supported by farming and tourism. Access from the city of **Pereira** in the coffee zone to **La Suiza**, and thence by unpaved road (14 kilometers) to the east. There are various facilities inside the park which showcase the traditional *paisa*, or regional, design incorporating white walls and tiled or thatched roofs and wooden porticos and *balcones.*

## Galeras

Another flora and fauna sanctuary (SFF), this park is the national symbol for **Nariño** - Colombia's wild, beautifully forested, sometimes dangerous Pacific-facing department whose capital is **Pasto** and bordering Ecuador. The centerpiece is the [**Galeras**](http://geology.com/volcanoes/galeras/)volcano, among the continent`s most active, with some vents emitting gases almost continuously. Cold, with temperatures from 3 to 13 degrees Celcius, and perched at 1,950 to 4,276 meters above sea level, Galeras is páramo and cloud forest, rich in river systems and diverse climate conditions including high solar heat, humidity and precipitation.

To get there take the highway from the Huila capital city of **Popoyan** to Pasto, and from there the 118 kilometer *circunvalacion*, or circle route, through the seven municipalities that border the protected area.

Look for dwarf forests dominated by Velvet Trees (*Miconia sp.*), and flowering ferns such as Mortiños ( *Hesperomeles sp.*), the so-called blueberry of the Andes. Six species of frogs including the *atelopus ignescens*, known as the *sapito arlequin de Nariño* (little harlequin toad of Nariño), and in danger of extinction. Another is the *eleutherodactus repens*, known locally as the *rain frog of Galeras*, and also on the threatened list. There are 13 kinds of hummingbirds including nine local and one migratory species.

The volcano however is the most popular attraction of the park, hosting numerous trails which wind past beautiful lakes, waterfalls, and mineral hot springs and afford spectacular mountain and urban view points. Access is on the ring road from Popoyán to Pasto winding through seven municipalities bordering the park and within the protected zones. Vehicles can travel as far as the **El Frailejonal** trail, at 3,920 meters above sea level, where subsequent trails such as **Telpis** with its excellent views of high peaks and the **Chiles, Cumbal**, and **Cotopaxi** cones in neighbouring Ecuador.

**Trails |** There are four, any of which can be accomplished inside a day if you leave early. Recommended visit to the park is one night and two days. However, the trails are only open when the eruption risk is rated at “four”. Watch for updates.

There are numerous tours out of Popoyán and especially Pasto, which is on the slope of Galeras. If you’re driving or taking local transit from Pasto you need to get to the **Urcunina** sector where the control cabin is located. From there it’s 20 minutes or a two hour hike to ‘the Y’ (3,920 meters above sea level). The **Achichay** trail is on your right. For Telpis you need to take the route to **San Felipe**, via the municipality of **Yacuanquer**, where the interpretative center is located. If and when you get there ask them about the *duendes* (gnomes) of the volcano.

*Achichay*: Great for bird watchers and plant enthusiasts, with a profusion of different wild orchids, begonias, and swallows or golondrias in Spanish. One kilometre long with average difficulty. It has a great view of the Galeras cone and various smokers (fumaroles) in and around it. See if you can tag along with one of the many volcanologists who are attracted by the frequent, violent, and sudden outbursts from Galeras. The last of these in 2010 sent ash 12 kilometers high.

*Frailejonal*: 2.1 kilometers and average difficulty. You can see the city of Pasto from here, and the valley of Atriz plus the high mountains marking the eastern edge of the Amazon jungle. Lots of vegetation along the banks of the river Mijitayo.

*Telpis*: 1.3 kilometers, average difficulty. You’ll see the spectacular Telpis lake and various cones like Chiles, Cumbal, and Cotopaxi in neighbouring Ecuador.

*Jossepe*: One kilometer, medium difficulty. Andean forest and waterfalls. It follows a high ridge along secondary peaks to Galeras. Great views!

Galeras also has some fascinating secondary trails with links to local folklore and with fascinating names like **Trono del Rey** (throne of the king), **Ciudad Perdida** (lost city), and **El Barco** (the ship). The most popular of these is 1,600 meter **La Virgen**. Other attractions are the caves **La Gringa** and **La Chorrera** with their interesting formations and insects/amphibians, and birds found only in semi desert regions. You can also hike to a town called **La Playa de Belen.**

## Los Estoraques

Located in Norte de Santander and renowned for a naturally occurring spectacle: a series of erect stone columns shaped by millions of years of erosion, appearing within hills which rise up vertically from the forest floor. Deemed a unique natural area by the parks ministry, and measuring only 640 hectares, from 1,450 to 1,950 meters above sea level. Dry and sub Andean forest. Road access is from **Cúcuta** on the border with Venezuela to **Abrego** and **La Playa de Belén**, a five hour drive; or from Bogotá or Bucaramanga, the capital of Santander.



*Los estoraques*

## Doña Juana – Cascabel

Temperate to cold, measuring 65,000 hectares located 1,100 to 4,350 meters above sea level, and named for the region's major volcanos. Dense jungles and river systems and lakes over páramo and sub Andean forest. Located in Cauca northeast of Narino department, in the central east sector of the Colombian Andes. Accessible by road from Pasto and Popoyán. No accommodation, and food must be carried in. Spectacular waterfalls, craggy forested peaks, fascinating flora, particularly mountain flowers, and birdlife. Trails take the vistor past volcanic lakes and the cones themselves, named Doña Juana, Animas, and Petacas. Doña Juana is rated as a "large" volcano of "cataclysmic" destructive power, and last erupted in 1906 killing 100 people and destroying many houses. The name stems from a legend of the Chincha Indians. Climbed from a slope in the so-called Valley of Orchids, and surrounded by extraordinary biodiversity, 471 species of birds including the Andean Condor, plus bears and deer.

*moorhen.jpg*

## PACIFIC REGION |

## Gorgona

Deserted tropical islands are a real treat: Dense jungle lining the shore, a tiny coral sandbar at the windward side vanishing into the emerald sea, flocks of tiny green lloros sweeping out of the forest.

Gorgona isn't that kind of island because it has permanent residents. But you can still get that Robinson Crusoe feeling on one of its deserted beaches or jungle trails. Located on 61,000 hectares just 35 kilometers from Colombia's **Narino** department, on the Pacific coast, it was named by Francisco Pizarro in 1527 when he arrived to find a large number of venomous snakes. It attracted more dubious fame centuries later as a prison colony. Visitors get to experience two of the most popular ecosystems in Colombia: tropical jungle, plus pristine coral sand beaches . The average temperature is 27 degrees - hot!

Gorgona is a pair of islands, including the smaller **Gorgonilla** which from a distance looks like a whale's back. It counts 381 species of fish, 11 of whales and dolphins, and four of sea lions. More than 85% of the landmass is covered with jungle, with various lakes and up to 85 creeks. Access is via 90-minute boat ride in a daily launch from **Guapi**, or four hours from the capital city of **Buenaventura**. Or you can arrive by air from any Colombian city with Aviatur.

The longest trail at five kilometers is **Playa Palmeras**, which leads the hiker over improvised bridges and stairs through immense tropical vegetation teeming with white face monkeys, and within view of the smaller Gorgonilla islet. You`ll see popular medicinal plants and secondary tropical forest from the shorter **La Chonta** trail (800 meters). These lead to an interpretive center plus sites of interest from the island's prison past including **Casa Payán** and **El Penal**. Popular beaches are **Pizarro, Blanca, Palmeras**, and **Playa Yundigua** with its **El Actuario** zone where fish approach the shore to feed. La Playa La Camaronera has 25 crystal clear streams cutting down from the jungle to the sea over half a kilometer of coral sand. The Antigua Murelle is a refuge for marina fauna and excellent for snorkeling.

Every year between June and November approximately 800 whales, primarily humpbacks (*megaptera novaeangliae*), arrive to mate and reproduce in a popular spectacle that attracts divers from around the world. You`ll want to avoid visiting in the rainy season of September/October. The island has accommodation, a restaurant, a swimming pool, and offers diving instruction as well.

The waters offshore drop to 85 meters where divers will see diablo mantas, sharks, turtles, whale sharks and plenty of fish. Popular dive sites are El Remanso, La Tiburonera (the shark hunter), La Playa de Toros, Las Montanitas I and II (fascinating rock formations) and La Cazuela (a marine fauna paradise), among others. The most popular show of course is the calving of Humpback whales who travel from the South Pole to mate in the warm tropical waters. Your chances of seeing this can be quite good if you get reliable intelligence from shore and time it right. Package tours are three nights and four days but you can stay longer if need be. Guided tours are in Spanish.

**Diving**. Gorgona is often packaged with a trio of dive sites including Malpelo in Colombia and the Cocos off Costa Rica. It’s reportedly fantastic. One account from poorbuthappy.com describes it thus: *“The underwater scene is spectacular. Schools of one million pompanos 20 lbs each, sleeping sharks inside caves, hundreds of sea turtles, territorial moray eels and freezing waters below 100 ft makes the Gorgona experience unique!*” Check with [underseahunter.com](http://www.underseahunter.com/) for details, or [Aviatur](http://productos.aviatur.com/Paquetes_Turisticos/gorgona-10-01-2014.html) for standard two and three day packages. Another operator, [aquasubbuceos](http://www.aquasubbuceo.com/), has received good reviews.

## Los Katios

Named for the *Embera-Katios* tribe who battled the Kuna for possession of the territory and eventually took it. Located in the northwest of the country, bordering **Panama** and the departments of **El Chocó** and **Antiochia**. Topography is floodplains, marshland, hills and mountains, typical of the Tapón del Darién, the short expanse of jungle that separates Colombia from Panama. Access is by launch from the town of **Turbo**, on the Caribbean coast, located a 30 minute flight from Medellin.



*Indigenous Embera, or Katio | PNN archive photo*

Numerous ecosystems including tropical jungle, tiny cloud forests, and flood plains with numerous river systems and waterfalls. From the **Sautata** sector the **Tilupo, Tendal**, and **La Tigra** falls ranging to 125 meters high may be seen, plus secondary forest growth and typical flora and fauna. These include 550 species of vertebrates, 113 of fish, and 412 registered bird species. The forest is considered the most important filter or barrier of Central and South American plants and animals. There are 669 botanical species. Animals include the *potos flavus*, or Kinkajou, (honey bear), often mistaken for ferrets or monkeys but unrelated to both. Native to both C. And S. America. Beyond the animal and vegetal riches, and close to the park boundaries, are a variety of local cultures including the African Colombian and protected (resguardo) indigenous communities of *Kuna-Makilakuntiwala, Embera-Chami-Katio de la Raya, Perancho*, and *Peranchito*.

**Medicinal plants |** Penicilo (*penicillium notatum*). Penicillin as a folkloric medicine dates from the late 1800s when an old witchdoctor from Medellin named Ildefonso Londono, affectionately known to the locals as *el brujo*, or the sorcerer, achieved personal fame and fortune by using it to cure gonorrhea. According to one historical account, Londono as a young man had accompanied a Venezuelan doctor into the province of El Choco bordering the Panamanian isthmus and learned how the *Wounaa* and *Embra* people cured the panoply of sexually transmitted diseases bestowed on them by the Spanish. One involved a kind of urethra wash composed of sugar cane panela mixed into a *natilla*, or paste, along with copious mushrooms, actually a kind of fungi from the Aspergillaceae family of molds. Known simply as penicilo, a word stemming no doubt from the Spanish *pene* for penis, the remedy was effective and found widespread use despite the disapproval of Medellin's medical establishment. Penicilo is commonly found in temperate and subtropical regions, though the Plantas Colombianas by Mauro Hernandez Mesa doesn't mention whether the Embra actively cultivated it. It was more likely found from foraging, though it may have actually grown along the walls inside their dwellings. Penicilo works against gram positive bacterias including streptococcus pyogenes (strep throat and impetago) and aureus (skin and respiratory tract), pneumoccus, (meningitis, pneumonia), and staphylococcus.

## Utria

Few places demonstrate as much mystery and beauty as Utria located in the Pacific coast region of El Chocó. Yet the few visitors who make it to the Pacific coast usually miss it, which is a pity. South of the Utría Cove, foothills covered with thick tropical jungle and semi-hidden in the mist break into the sea, while the shoreline of the inlet itself changes with the fall and rise of the tide. Impressive!



*Katio girl*

A series of mountain tributaries considered sacred to the local Emberá people tumble through it all to the sea. Access is by air from Bogotá or Cali to Bahia Solano, where jeeps transport visitors to El Valle, and thence by foot trail to the park. An eight hour boat ride from the Pacific coast port of Buenaventura is also possible. The calm waters of the reefs off Colombia’s Pacific are a natural breeding ground for Humpback whales and that serves to draw the majority of tourists, along with the deserted beaches of El Choco. However, the season for whale watching is rather imprecise: the second half of the year, according to most credible reports. The latest intel I have from the Pacific Coast as of this October however is no sightings at all. "The season is just over," say the locals. That's the standard reason for whale scarcity. If that's high on your list of priorities it's wise to pick up reports of sightings before you make the trip west. Be prepared to get wet. The parks gets 300 consecutive days of rain annually! But here's the good news: You and your park guide will probably be the only humans there, apart from the African Colombian descendants of rubber workers and Emberá communities who live within the park and its environs. Note: Flying to Bahia Solano is expensive. There are two flights weekly from Bogota with Satena Air for about $250 USD return. For tours try emailing the community tour operator there called Corporacion Mano Cambiada, or call Josephina Klinger Zuniga or Leida Valencia at (cell) 311 872-7887, 320 214-1116; or in Bogota at 3402850. Local numbers in Nuqui are (7) 6836141 and (7)6836339.

**Medicinal plants |** Adonis | A perennial plant 10 to 30 centimeters high with feathery, finely divided leaves. Their flowers are red, yellow or orange and have 5–30 petals. According to legend, the goddess Venus transformed the wounded Adonis into a flower of the same name, leaving a drop of blood on each leaf. Adonis is known to work as a diuretic, and acts on the circulatory system and particularly the arterial pressure on the heart. A tincture prepared from the whole plant is used to combat water retention, valvular heart disease, or the improper closing of the heart`s tricupsid valve, and cardiac asthma, the coughing or wheezing which is symptomatic of congestive heart failure.

## Malpelo

The name literally means bad hair. Malpelo is an island of sheer rock cliffs 500 kilometers from the Pacific port city of Buenaventura which plunge precipitously by more than 4,000 meters to the sea floor. Over 850,000 hectares, including 11 serially spaced peñascos, or vertical outcroppings, jutting 10 to 40 meters above the surface of the sea. Only 120 hectares correspond to its landmass.

Malpelo is devoid of vegetation and plant life, but hosts the world's largest collection of white seabirds known as Nazca Booby (sula granti). Malpelo is the 9th largest protected marine area in the world, and deemed among the top 10 for diving, comprising the centerpoint of the so-called Golden Diving Triangle including Isla Coco of Costa Rica, and the Galapagos of Ecuador. Access is by tour arranged by Fundacion Malpelo or the Ecotourism Office of the national parks office.

The rainy season is May to December, with January to April as the coldest water months. Boat tours are also operated from Panama and Costa Rica to include international diving destinations.

There are four authorized tour operators for diving expeditions to Malpelo:

[Embaracaciones Asturias](mailto:barcoasturias@yahoo.com)

[Pacific Diving](mailto:info@cascoantiguocolombia.com)

[Coiba Dive Expedition](http://www.coibadiveexpeditions.com/web/)

[Inula UAA Adventures](http://www.inula-diving.com/)

**Medicinal plants** | Cacao (Sterculiaceae). A tree from 10 to 12 feet in height, with oblong leaves, small dark purple flowers, and oval fruit about six inches long. Grown mostly in El Chocó, on the border with Central America and Panama, and the banks of the Amazon tributary Napo which flows between Colombia and Ecuador. The common name cacao stems from the ancient Aztec name *cacaocuahuti*.

**Birds** | The Garza birds | *La Garza Morena* (*ardea cocoi*) , a species of heron in the Ardeidae family known as a non-breeding visitor to Trinidad and Tobago and a vagrant to the Falkland Islands and Tristan da Cunha. A large bird, it can reach lengths to 127 centimeters (50 inches). *| La Garza Blanca* is a large bird with white plumage growing to a meter in height and almost a kilo in weight. Males and females are identical, with slow flight and withdrawn neck. Hunted in North América during the latter part of the 19th century for their feathers which were popular hat adornments. The population is recovering.| *La Garza Tinta* or snowy egret, a beautiful small white heron, is a migratory bird with some permanently resident in warmer climates such as the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Colombia. They have a slim black bill and long black legs with yellow feet. The area of the upper bill, in front of the eyes, is yellow but turns red during the breeding season, when the adults also gain recurved plumes on the back, making for a "shaggy" effect. The juvenile looks similar to the adult, but the base of the bill is paler, and a green or yellow line runs down the back of the legs.

## Uramaba Bahia Malaga

A long, deep bay located near **Buenaventura** in the department of **Valle**, Bahia Malaga is popular with locals for its beaches. Ecotourists visit mostly to view the humpbacked whales which gather here during their annual mating migration in June through November, and also to take in its hugely diverse ecosystems. You can get there by air from Bogotá to Cali or Buenaventura, an hour by speedboat from the Bahia. Along the way you'll get great views of lush jungles spilling down to the isolated beaches at water's edge, plus and occasional fisherman's shack. Traveling the parks numerous waterways by dugout is the best way to get around. Locals are predominantly African Colombian, though tribes of *Wounaan* coexist in various protected communities (resguardos) beyond the park boundaries, and separated extraofficially by a miltary road that leads to a naval base.

The commercial and tourist center of Malaga include **Juanchaco** and **Ladrilleros**, largely populated by *mestizas*. Malaga is currently in flux: Although the government and local citizens are actively promoting the park's eco tourism potential, the presence of paramilitary forces and drug traffickers make it just dangerous enough to warrant caution. Temperatures range from 18-27 degrees and rainfall is permanent year round, created by the unique geography of the insular tropical rainforest sandwiched between the upper Andean mountains and the Pacific Ocean. It is common for rain to fall all night as the sky is torn apart by thunder and lightning.

The park itself forms part of the *Mosaico de Conservación Bahía Málaga*, a conservation corridor of spanning both national and regional protected areas. Popular visiting areas are **Death Estuary, Gorge of the Serpent, Tiger Cove**, and **Silver Island**.

**Medicinal plants** | Equisetum, (*equisetum bogotense H.B.K*, of the family *equisetaceae*) is also known as horse tail, mule tail, dish scrubber, or goat herb (*hierba de chivo*). It was cooked and used as a wash for treating lepers, to scrub the skin lesions, and in syrup form with zarzaparilla (*sarsparilla*) and gualanday. The ashes of horsetail plants are used in the treatment of ulcers owing to a large percentage of silica. Naturopaths recommend it as a diuretic. Tincture prepared with the whole plant is taken for kidney inflammation, *albuminuria*, (too much protein in urine), nightly incontinence, *cistitis* or inflammation of the bladder, and *hemoturia*.

## AMAZON and ORINOQUIA (Los Llanos)

Visiting the parks of Colombia's Amazon region presents unique challenges. For one, the indigenous people have banned tourists. Actually it's more accurate to say they've banned tour groups. They're incensed that the Spaniards, their less than affectionate term for Latino Colombians, are making money bringing foreigners into their homes, and not leaving any of it behind. Fair enough. The back story to it all is this: The government wants the park designations to be engines of economic development, in the country's far-flung regions, operated by and benefiting the people who live in them. But Colombians are nothing if not entrepreneurial. So you have tour operators from Bogotá flying in tourists and making the money and taking it back with them.

The individual can still visit these great parks although it may require a bit of finesse. Aviatur still runs two and three day air tours to the Amazon, but you'll have to be content with viewing the jungle from trails in the vicinity of Letica. With boots on the ground, a little Spanish, and some manners, you won't have any problem securing a local guide to take you further afield.

**Getting there**

The national domestic airline, [Satena](http://www.satena.com/inicio) Airlines, flies from Bogota to a handful of out of the way destinations in both the Amazonas region and los llanos to the southeast (see map below). These regional centers are the gateways to Colombia’s spectacular but lesser known parks, such as La Paya. There are also some rather obscure community-based tour operators (check the appendix for contacts) in each of these who will be glad to help you. You don't need to worry about security in the Amazon apart from the usual precautions. Yes, there is guerrilla activity but locals know where they are and won't take you into them.

The Amazon can refer to a couple of places: The state or 'department' of Colombia called Amazonas, situated in the southernmost part of the country on the border with Peru and Brazil; and a larger region comprising the departments of Amazonas, Caquetá, Guainía, Guaviare, Putumayo and Vaupés. Both are marked by their unique jungles and communities of indigenous and/or campesino (mixed in some cases) communities, part of the Amazon Rainforest.

The department of Amazonas, (the capital is Leticia), measures 109,665 square kilometers with a population of 56,000 people. However, the named region has some 403,000 sq. km., or about 35% of the country's total territory.

Travel in the Amazon

The Parks office Guia which is available from the national parks office on Caracas in Bogotá has an exhaustive list of precautions for travel within this region. These include a list of items to bring with you during hikes and especially rules for avoiding contact with local fauna, especially venomous snakes.

* Avoid areas where there is tall grass and brush. Stay on trails.
* Avoid snake bites by looking carefully wherever you step or place your hand. This is especially true when rock climbing or exploring in caves.
* Realize that snakes can climb trees.
* Dress in protective clothing.
* Don't camp near large logs, rocky areas or tall grass. Snakes are usually nocturnal.
* Avoid swimming around steep, rocky shorelines.
* Use caution when approaching a snake you think might be dead.

## La Paya



Approximately 422,000 hectares of humid tropical forest located 200/300 meters above sea level, on the border with Ecuador, and bordered by several river systems which feed the legendary Amazon. Average temperature of 26 to 28 degrees Celcius. The protected area is a sedimentary flood plain with tropical jungle. White water rivers such as Putamayo and Caquetá feed rivers to the Amazon and lake systems. There are some 30 campesino settlements, principally people from Narino and Huila. Many have married into local indigenous tribes and adopted some of their culture, forging a new inter-ethnic society.

Highlights of the park are the lakes of the **Caucaya River**, the **La Apaya Lake**, and the indigenous *Lagarto Cocha* community. There are currently no facilities in the park for ecotourism and access is by river only. An administrative cabana exists in the **Quebrada Blanca** sector with accommodation for 10 people, and another on the Caucaya River, called Viviana Cocha, which can be visited by special permission with the parks office. The best strategy however is to arrange a tour with locals at Puerto Asis, (which is an eight hour canoe ride from the park centers of Puerto Leguizamo and five hours from La Paya), accessible by road from Mocoa and Neiva. November to March is the dry season.

## Amacayacu

Large, wild and imposing, this 290,000 hectare park tucked into the country’s southeastern corner bordering Peru and Brazil is how most tourists envision the remote Amazonian jungle, and it doesn’t disappoint. The name means *land of the hammocks* in the native *Quechua* tongue, a rather pedestrian way to describe a region which teems with exotic plants and wildlife. Murky rivers meander through impenetrable jungle towards the Amazon; the humidity is stifling; dustbowl sunsets fill the sky. This is Amacayacu, part of the flat, trilateral jungle draining into the world’s largest river by water flow, the mighty Amazon. Access to the park is by air from Bogotá to Leticia, and by boat to the park entrance. Private accommodation is available at the **Yewae Visitors Center**, or in hammocks at the **El Vergel** indigenous village. July is the driest month, and October the rainiest.

## Cahuinari

Located northwest of Amacayacu on 575,000 hectares, and drained by the **Cahuinari River** which flows down from 3,000 meters above sea level. Access is by air from Leticia with an overnight stop at La Pedrera. A control cabin at **Bocas del Cahuinari**, on the Caquetá River, accommodates groups of five or less. October to January are the dry months.

The park was the first in Colombia to involve local communities in plans for its conservation and preservation; these include the *Bora, Mirana, Andoque, Nonuya-muinane*, and *Huitoto* peoples, who are found today living in small villages along the Caquetá River. In October of 2012, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos publicly apologized to the modern day descendants of those tribespeople brutally massacred by corporate interests during the rubber boom of the early 20th century. There are six guarded communities on the banks of the Caquetá which thrive from hunting/gathering and horticulture.

Highlights of the park are the waterfalls along the **El Sol** tributary and small natural pools occurring among the rocks. The innumerable lakes of the River Cahuinari support a thriving native fishery. The jungle is in pristine condition; animal species of the park have gone largely unreported, and those that are known stem from local knowledge of tribes people who subsist on them. These include a kind of edible frog called *Osteocephalus taurinus*, from the Hylidae family, which is reported to produce a substance (*Bufotenin*) related to the neurotransmitter serotonin, and in quantifies sufficient for a psychoactive effect. Locals harvest the frog during Semana Santa, the holiest week in the Christian calendar.

## El Tuparro

This is one of the earliest designated biospheres in the country, designated such in accordance with the UNESCO resolution to unite people with nature, (Man and Nature,or MAB for short) in 1970. Currently closed to tourism due to paramilitary activity.

## Sierra de la Macarena

The park is located on 629,000 hectares in the department of **Meta**, accessed from the capital of **Villavicencio** about three hours from Bogotá. The park is famous for the brilliant colours of red algae in a river system known as **Cano Cristales**, best viewed from September to December. One may also see hotsprings (Vista Hermosa), waterfalls (Salto de Santo Domingo), and pictographs at the 1st and 2nd narrows of the **Guayabero River**, and also at **Piedra Gorda de Lejanias**. There is an indigenous community of some 200 *Guayaberos* in the Cano Ceiba Bajo zone.

Macarena has multiple eco-systems including tropical jungle, shrublands, and Amazonian savanna, or sabanas, which stretch east to the oil fields of Venezuela. It also comprises four different geological regions - Andean, Amazonian, Orinoquia, (belonging to the Orinoco River watershed), and the Guyana Shield, an ancient geological base which is shared with much of northern South America. The Amazon region which touches on the park, and measures some 7 million square kilometres in all, explains why Macarena is known for having the widest diversity of species within the smallest area in the world. A complete inventory of the flora and wildlife has yet to be taken, but one may find the Amazonian flower el zapatillo (*sterculia macarenensis*), birds such as el trepatroncos (*straight billed woodcreeper*), and the multi coloured *tángara* at higher elevations in the north-central region of the park.

**Trail systems** | There is accommodation at the town of La Macarena, about five kilometres from the Canos Cristales. To the northwest is the river Guayabero, where one can find pre-Colombian petroglyphs at the narrows, carved in bas relief on the rocks. From here it's a 90 minute walk to the **Ciudad de Piedra** which are enormous rock formations shaped by wind and water.

In the zona norte are the hot springs at la **Vereda Monserrate, Charcos**, and the waterfall **La Quebrada La Curia**. The trail is known as *la Cuchilla del Tablazo*.

In the *zona sur* are the **Canos Cristales**, a 70 meter high waterfall at **Canoas,** the waterfalls **del Aguila** and **Gato**, the rapids of **Cuarzo**, and the **Ciudad de Piedra** and the **Güejar River** where new species of fish (*creagrutus maculosus*, 2010) are still being found.

## Serrania de los Churumbelos Auka-Wasi

Totalling some 97,000 hectares, Churumbelos straddles four departments: **Caquetá, Huila, Putumayo**, and mostly **Cauca**. Its elevation ranges from 400 to 3,000 meters above sea level and hosts 461 bird species, almost a third of the total for Colombia. It is also the bridge between the Andes and the Amazon jungle, bordering the eastern slope of the Andes, the central cordillera, and the Amazon. There are no trails in the park, and special permission is required from the authorities to visit it. However, as with most parks in Colombia you can make your way to the nearest human settlement, in this case **Piamonte** in Cauca, and inquire with the locals. There are two routes to the park, via **San Juan de Villalobos** in Cauca to **Mocoa** and **Piamonte**, or via **Pitalito** in Huila to the same.

You'll encounter lowland forests, foothills, and mountains with 825 plant species including three newly discovered ones: *Columnea reticulata*, a kind of flowering shrub, *columnea coronocripta*, and the *piper sp.* with its slender, corrogated leaves. Wildlife include pumas, oso anteoyos, (spectacled bears), and some 144 species of butterflies. Indigenous peoples living inside the park are the *Ingana*, renowned for their knowledge of medicinal plants and predilection for preserving their native tongue. The Ingana have various sacred sites inside the park including **La Laguna de San Rafael**, considered vital to the park's extensive river system, and the páramos which are deemed the habitat for various dieties, called **Aukas**, and myths.

Places to see are the **Cuevas de Licamancha**, with their sheer, narrow canyons and freshwater pools. They can be visited from a narrow rural route, or *vereda*, known as **Signocarmelo** in the town of **Santa Rosa**, on the Bogotá/Pitalito/Popoyán route to the park. Other attractions are the **Indio** waterfall in Mocoa, the **Ornoyaco** rapids, and the site of a spectacular swimming hole called **Dantayaco**, or the Fin Del Mundo (end of the world) *quebradra* (stream).

**Medicinal plants** | *Yagé*. Hallucinogen enthusiasts get a little confused in Colombia over this one. Ayahuasca, for example, is a concoction of various plants with psychedelic properties, and goes by several different names because indigenous peoples in Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia with distinct language groups all use it. The word ayahuasca is a palindrome in the Quechua language of Ecuador, comprised of two words; aya, or cadaver, and huasca, which merely means vine or climbing plant. The Coreguajes and Juitotos of the southeastern department of Caquetá call the plant yagé; which means blue dream. Elsewhere it’s known by other indigenous tribes as toma, nepa, pinde, and kahi. The epicenter for yagé use is Florencia, the capital of Caqueta, neighbouring the Parque Natural Nacional de Picachos. The plant has a long, illustrious history both recently and among the 16th century conquistadores who took a keen interest in the role it played in the spiritual lives of the indigenous tribes of the New World. The earliest known incidence of ayahuasca use according to Mauro Hernandez Mesa’s Plantas Colombianas occurred in 1475, when an Incan priest ingested an ayahuasca brew and predicted the death of Atahualpa and the end of the Incan empire at the hands of Francisco Pisarro. It was later deemed a plant of the devil by the so-called Protector of the Indians and inquisitor Vincente Valverde, the first Bishop of South America who was killed and eaten on Puna Island off Guayaquil, Ecuador, reportedly after having molten gold poured down his throat as a punishment for Spanish greed. The important thing to remember about the folkloric use of Colombia’s Amazonian plants is their specific use: both as a truth serum, chiefly to determine a man or woman’s fidelity, and for divination, or seeing into the future. All shamanic use of yagé and its related plants was directed to these ends, and there is considerable evidence to suggest it actually worked for them. There is also some mythology of licanthropy connected with the use of it. However, this is probably the result of confusion with a plant species called datura arborea which is known to cause violent reactions in the user. In 1926, a magazine called Metapsychique published an article by an author called Roubrier on the subject of divination and yagé, saying, *"... the Indians at night boil a kilo of yagé in various litres of water for half an hour, until there is no more than 25 centilitres of liquid left. It is then consumed with 30 grams of aguardiente of honey made from sugar cane. The subject is taken to a place where valuable objects are believed to have been lost or buried, and asked if they are indeed there, and if so in what location. This is almost always followed with satisfactory results."* Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo witnessed one such session on the Island of Haiti and recorded the experience in his illustrated Historia General Y Natural de los Indias Occidentales, now in the Royal Library of Madrid. Two shaman were brought before a Cacique, or chief, and given a mysterious liquid which caused convulsions. Questioned by the chief about the Spanish the subjects spoke precisely and coherently about the number of ships, arms, horses, and men enroute to their shores. Oviedo notes that these practices disappeared completely with the arrival of Christianity.

**Traditional uses**

Yagé was undoubtedly used in the same manner as coca; it was prepared by priests who guarded both the recipes and instructions for use. The Spanish often confused it with jiculi, or lophophora, the slow growing Mexican cactus commonly known as peyote, and used by the Aztecs to such an extent that one missionary remarked, *"...their God is nothing more than a diabolical root."* (For historical information on peyote refer to Plantarum Mexicanorum by Francisco de Hermandez). Yagé is also confused often with huachuma cactus (*cereus peruvianus*), native to Peru and Ecuador, whose flowers have a certain narcotic virtue. After more than 3,000 years huachuma’s shamanic use has not diminished, and it is widely consumed in tea in Peru by locals and intrepid tourists alike. Latter day entheogenicists consider it the male counterpart to the more femine ayahuasca. Explains one enthusiast, *"...ayahuasca is a vine that grows with twisting, sensuous curves; huachuma is a columnar cactus that grows straight up toward the sun like an erect penis. As a gay man, I felt very at home with it."* (excerpted from good medicine huachuma).

Yagé has also been mistakenly identified as belonging to the family aristolochia, a woody perennial vine proven to be a dangerous kidney toxin. Its use as a medicinal plant in pregnant women goes back to Egyptian times and even to the present day in China. And Yagé was once erroneously named *haemadicyton amazonicum* of the widely-used *apociniaceas* plant species. Many ancient accounts of Yagé use are centered around the important southeastern city of Florencia, the capital of Caquetá department which bisects the mountains of the Andes and the Amazon. Florencia is close to the wild Picachos National Park and the coffee growing region of Pitalito in neighouring Huila where evidence of Colombia’s oldest known civilization is found in the stone statues of San Agustin. The folkloric knowledge of plant medicine in this part of the country extends through thousands of years, though the tribal rituals associated with the culture of yagé are now lost. However, some were documented in the early 20th century. The Belgian doctor Florentino Claer witnessed one such, and recounts: *“…the evening signals the time to consume the plant, and in preparation all the women are sent one or two hours down river where they remain until the fiesta has ended. Dogs are leashed and removed in the belief that they too would damage the yagé experience. The plant is a vine which grows deep in the jungle and reaches heights of some 15 to 20 meters interlaced to the treetops which support it. It is not found near the coreguajes who have harvested and consumed all in the vicinity. It was the 4th of October, 1925 when one of the chiefs advised me to move my hammock to the witch doctor's ranch and spend the night there. When I arrived the chief motioned me silently to my post, beside a dozen or so others waiting quietly beside their hammocks for the ceremony to begin. The sorceror was seated on a dais inside a hut; to his left was a pot full of yagé with a packet of leaves on the top, and beside it a smaller pot with what looked like cooked yuca root. To his right was a kind of scepter made of bird plumage and beside that a branch of leaves used as a water sprinkler. By 6:30 it was all but dark, and suddenly I heard a semi submerged voice going uff- uff- uff. I raised up from my hammock and saw the sorceror had made a semi turn from the dais and placed his feet on the pot of yagé. He began striking the edge of the pot with the branch as though to disperse evil spirits. The strange sound of the leaves was added to by various incantations of the brujo, which I assumed were prayers invoked by the yagé god. The rest of us remained silent and motionless.”*

*“Presently he returned to his post, and with scepter in hand resumed the recital of some kind of chant to which the rest of them responded. He continued using the sprinkler (presumably) to ward off the evil spirits for some 15 minutes, after which someone began to dress him in a ceremonial costume comprising a flat crown made of birds’ wings and about half a dozen large and brightly-coloured Guacamaya feathers. Next, collars were placed slowly and ceremoniously up to his ears which prevented him moving his head, though his body continued to gyrate. Behind the head ornament was hung a mantle of brilliant feathers which trailed down the length of the spine; a great collar of tigers’ teeth was worn over the chest, and more feathers about the ears and hair. Dressed thus, the shaman recovered his scepter and sprinkler and after doing several slow turns about the pot of yagé placed it on a shield from which it was distributed.*

*At about midnight a bare breasted woman came in and sat cross legged in front of the shaman. He passed the scepter and sprinkler gently around her neck and shoulders; the singing stopped, and the woman removed herself to a corner where she sat quietly. The distribution of the yagé continued, with the liquid dispensed from a funnel. The intoxication from it now began, as the shaman raised himself violently from his post and began to sign and gesture wildly,all the while making repeated identical movements with the scepter. He spoke rapidly and forcefully, and judging from the approving looks and obvious happiness of the participants, had reached the height of intoxication. I realized then that he was experiencing hallucinogenic visions and imparting them to the admiring throng.*

*The Indians listened with religious attention. He fell prostrate as though temporarily deprived of his senses and almost immediately sprang to his feet and fled from the ranch, weaving from side to side while uttering incantations incomprehensible to me, finally disappearing into the jungle from whence I could hear him grunting like a pig. The Indians were gesturing wildly and grunting also, and talking among themselves. By now it was four a.m. The shaman reentered the compound and continued his incantations in a very excited manner before falling conmpletely silent. The assistant then removed his ceremonial garb and he fell heavily onto the dais where he remained. The ceremony was apparently finished, and we had consumed some two litres of yagé. I left with the conviction that the Indians indeed viewed the plant as a kind of divinity who can make known the past, present and future.”*

A more involved study of the effects of yagé was made by Mauro Hernandez Mesa, the author of Plantas Colombianas, who ingested it from tincture on March 4 of 1932 and reported: *" ...the first symptom was a light trembling in the extremities which you might experience with cocaine. Forty five minutes later I fell victim to a terrible inebriation. Despite the opinion of don Guillermo Fisher that yagé was less intrusive on the senses than hashish, this was much more active. We had the vision of the suicide of a dear friend which was regrettably realized some six months later.".*

There is a documented case of at least one murder being solved by administering the plant to a Coreguaje chief named Piranga. Intoxicated thus, he was able to ascertain the victim's true cause of death, which had eluded the coroner, and implicate the culprit, who later confessed.(Yagé, Planta Misteriosa y Sugestiva. Calderon, Daniel. 1944. Colombia 1: 6&7: 87-88).

Yagé has been studied by Merck Laboratories and used medicinally in the treatment of epilepsy and Parkinson’s Disease. However, its homeopathic use is more wide ranging, from stuttering to headaches and amnesia; madness to delirium, dizzy spells, and Saint Vitus Dance.

## Tinigua



This is the third of Colombia's south-central parks adjoining the preCambrian Guyana trend, on approx. 208,000 hectares of largely flat, undulating lowlands covered with jungle. Access is from the Meta capital of Villavicencio in the north to **Mesetas**, and by 4X4 to **La Julia**. Public transport this far is possible. It's also reachable from the south, from **San Vicente del Caguan** to La Macarena, a 10 hour trip in the summer. You'll need to pack in your own supplies and a hammock, but accommodation of a sort is available both in La Macarena and the pueblos adjoining the park. You'll also need to check with local authorities to see if there are any security issues. There are trails along the rivers *Guyabero* and *El Duda* developed over the years by naturalists studying the park's flora and fauna. December to March and August/September are the best months to visit. There are archeological sites shared with **Parque La Macarena**, left by the early *Arawak* inhabitants, and located in the narrows of the **Duda** and **Guyabero** rivers. The name *Tinigua* is related to the Arawak and *Guahibo* languages but its meaning has been lost. You'll see numerous species of monkeys, exotic plants such as *el guasco*, a kind of evergreen, and *coco de mico*, and very large trees 30 to 40 meters in height. There are deer, pumas, and tapirs, and some brilliantly-coloured parrots.

## Serrania de Chiribiquete

Adjoining La Macarena is the largest of the parks comprising the Guyana Shield shared with Venezuela, **Serrania de Chiribiquete**, some 1,200,000 hectares or 4,651 square miles of preCambrian rock formations and undulating lowlands, cut with winding rivers and very dense forest (Serrania means mountain range in Spanish). It is considered the heart of the Colombian Amazon. Chiribiquete was the traditional territory of the *Karijona* people (est. pop. 307), whose remaining families live in the high areas of the river Vaupés and along the border with Brazil. They are known for their distinctive and brilliantly-coloured midriff skirts. There is no road access, but cargo planes operated by domestic carrier Satena make the trip from the Meta capital of Villavicencio a few hours from Bogotá to **Araracuara** or **Miraflores** on the edge of the park. Of the estimated 30 species of vegetation in the park only 15 have been logged. Among the fauna are 300 bird species and 317 different kinds of butterflies, plus 261 families of ants, some of which have only been seen before in fossilized form in Brazil. Visits should be coordinated with **The Fundacion Biologica Puerto Rastarojo**, which operates a research station in the south of the park where visitors can hang hammocks. There is no accommodation in the park's boundaries, though many communities exist there.

Chiribiquete is a strategic area of the Amazon, linked with the Andean region to the north and sharing a flood plain, or *sabana*, ecosystem with the **Macarena** park region. In the south it borders the Cahuinari and Puré parks, and the Nukak Reserve to the northeast. It has several lowland river systems, much of it brackish and dangerously low during the dry season, though some such as *Amú* are clear and fed by underground springs, with spectacular waterfalls and rapids. You'll also see trees anchored with huge exposed root systems to the edges of ravines, and filled with dense vegetation. The plant species in these areas have evolved to adapt to different levels of sunlight, and come in a wide variety.

**Trails** | The region is best viewed from one of the navigable river systems, such as **Mesay**. Highlights are the round, vertical mesas or *tepuyes* remaining from the old Guyana Shield rock, found among the **Iguaje** range in the **Ajaju** sector. The **Sararamano** is a three kilometre wide hole in the host rock which contains a very dense, 40 meter deep forest. There are also ancient pictographs at the narrows, or *raudales*, of the **Rio Mesay**.

## Rio Pure



This is the most densely forested, best preserved jungle in Colombia's Amazon region, and also the most remote. Almost 1 million hectares in size, Pure borders Brazil to the east and the Putumayo and Amazon rivers to the south. Access is by plane, from the Amazonas capital of **Leticia**, to **La Pedrera**. November to March is the best season to visit.

Rio Pure is part of a massive international parks system which forms the northwestern corridor of the Amazon jungle, called *Vale do Javari* by the indigenous peoples of the south of Colombia. The geological region extends to the border of **Surinam** and **Venezuela** where the **Montes de Roraima** and **Canaima** parks are located. Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil have endeavoured to protect the region as a whole, regardless of their respective national boundaries, to maintain the continuity of ecosystems and species and the integrity of the river systems. More than 1,500 species of plants from 133 families exist here, including four newly discovered ones, and 10 of which are in danger of extinction. Pure and its environs are also the ancestral home of nine indigenous tribes who continue to live as hunter/gathers from migratory agriculture, fishing, hunting, and collection of fruit and medicinal plants. These include the *Tanimuka, Yuri, Letuama, Yukuna, Macuna, Matapi, Cabiyari, Mirana*, and *Karijona* peoples. Hunting and harvesting is restricted to certain seasons and areas which, according to Macuna belief, were created and given to them as trustees of the land, and norms must be followed. For this reason and others, the tribes of the Amazon have decided collectively to avoid contact with the outside world. In fact, guards recently posted at key entry points, including the immensely popular Amacayacu park, have reportedly been turning back tour groups from Leticia.

However, there are small populations of campesinos at **La Pedrera, Tarapaca**, and **Arica**, and the locals here may be willing to take you down the rivers Caquetá or Putumayo if you get this far.

## Nukak



At over 850,000 hectares the **Nukak Reserva Nacional Natural**, located in **Guaviare** department, is considered even larger by virtue of the National Forest which surrounds it. The Zona de Reserva Forestal Nacional de Amazona is the ancestral home of the *Nukak, Puinave* and *Curripaco* Indians, among other tribes. Nukak shares the humid lowlands of the **Orinoco** flood plain with the jungles of the Amazon, providing two distinct zones with constant rain and expansive river systems. These have earned Nukak the title of *cradle of water*, and the habitat for countless species.

Getting there is challenging. The land route is by road from **San Jose de Guaviare** to **El Retorno**, and from there to a site called **El Mosco**, to **Caño Grande** and the **Inirida River**. It's eight days by river from here to **Mesa de la Lindosa** and **Tomachipan**, a two day journey in the rainy season. The Inirida has several narrows which become raging rapids when water levels drop, forcing travelers to portage at that time of year. However, you can also fly from the **Meta** capital of **Villavicencio** to **Flores** or **Tomachipan** with the domestic Satena airline. The rainy season is April to September.

Even by Amazonian standards Nukak teems with life and strange landscapes. Mist-shrouded hillocks, mountain ranges, thundering rivers and waterfalls, and the meandering black waters of the *llanos*, or lowlands, are all part of it. Among its 628 plant species, many of them native of the ancient Guyana Shield shared by Colombia and Venezuela, are two newly discovered bromelias native only to Colombia, called *Greiga* and *Aechmeal*. There are 24 different bats, and 48 endangered species listed in the red book.

People living in the park are the *Nukaks*, in the Nukak-Maku resguardo (and whose ancestral pictographs can be viewed at **Mesa la Lindosa** and cerros Pelado and Cocui), plus the *Cubeo, Tucano, Desano,* and *Piratapuyo* peoples among others. Colonists too share the park, and have built agrarian communities which now encroach on the western border of the *reserva*.

Access to Nukak is officially restricted to those engaged in education, conservation, and/or scientific investigation. However, there isn't a lot of oversight by park officials on the ground and this can be an advantage for intrepid tourists bent on seeing something spectacular. If you get as far as El Retorno you'll probably find a local guide willing to take you over to **Tomachipan** and perhaps into one of the tribal villages like **El Remanso** or **Cerro Cocui**, or a colonial poblado like **La Paz** or **La Lindosa**. Fascinating!

## Alto Fragua Indi Wasi



Located on approximately 68,000 hectares, in the eastern cordillera, between 900 and 3,276 meters above sea level, with a mild to cold climate. Home to the *culture of the yagé* indigenous peoples who include the descendants of migrant groups from Peru and Ecuador, the *Inganos* from the neighbouring department of **Putomayo**, and the modern day remnants of the *Andaki* people who fought the conquistadores.

To get there, take a plane from Bogotá to **Florencia**, in **Caquetá department** and arrange transport to **Belén de los Andaquies** and **San Jose del Fragua**. The dry season is December to February.

## Plantas Medicinales Orito Ingi-Ande

The name of this park stems from the *Kofán* language, meaning *our territory*, and signifying the twin mandate of species protection including humans, along with the so-called biological resources, or medicinal plant life, of the region. This 10,204 hectare park gets cool at night and warm by day, with temperatures from 10 to 26 degrees Celcius, and elevations soaring from 700 to 3,300 meters above sea level. **Ingi Ande** spans the **Putumayo** and **Narino** departments of Colombia's Amazonas region, and is accessed from **Puerto Asis** and **Orito** in Putumayo Department, via the community of **El Libano**, and thence by horseback or on foot to the park entrance. November to March is the dry season.



*Richard Evans Schultes | Author of Plants of the Gods*

Primary among the specialized flora of the park are those plants associated with the culture of the *yagé* - a South American jungle vine of the family *malpighiaceae* which is used in a decoction known as *ayahuasca*, and recognized by various tribes as a plant teacher. The name ayahuasca means "vine of the soul" in the *Quechuan* language. It’s more accurately described as a psychotropic concoction whose main ingredient is *Banisteriopsis caapi*. Ayahuasca, or simply caapi, includes a plant called **el yoco**, or *pullinia yoco*, a stimulant used to reduce hunger. El yoco was discovered in 1941 by the famed father of Amazonian botany **Richard Evans Schultes,** author of a definitive work on Amazonian psychedelic plants called[*The Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers*](http://books.google.ca/books/about/Plants_of_the_gods.html?id=5lB4QgAACAAJ&redir_esc=y) (1979). The book was co-authored by the discoverer of LSD[, Albert Hofman](http://www.stainblue.com/ah.html), and has never been out of print.

According to **The CRC World Dictionary of Plant Names** by Umberto Quattrocchi, the naming of B. caapi was actually dedicated to John Banister, a 17th-century English clergyman and naturalist. Ayahuasca is basically a shamanic brew which contains *harmine, harmaline*, and *tetrahydroharmine*, all of them with beta-carboline harmala alkaloids, and MAOIs, or monoamine oxidase inhibitors. The MAOI’s in B. caapi allow a powerful psychedelic compound of the family *tryptamine* called DMT to be ingested orally, and introduced from the other primary ingredient in ayahausca, the *psychotria viridis* plant.

Apart from their spiritual and psychedelic properties, these plants also have healing characteristics, and are all utilized in the traditional medicine of the Kofán people. B. caapi has a homeopathic use as a purgative, effectively cleansing the body of parasites and helping the digestive tract.

**Animals** | Among the fauna of our territory are a small nocturnal raptor know as the gavilán, (*bueto swainsoni*), the eagle de bocachico (*pandion heliaetus*), plus hummingbirds, (*colibres*), spectacled bears, monkeys such as the *mono churuco* and *blanco*, and the tigers *colorado* and *mariposo*.



*El yoco |*

Oddly enough there are no communities of tribes living inside the park, which has been used traditionally for collecting plants. The Kofán are recognized as innate botanists, with deep ancestral knowledge of folkloric medicine, and associated in a spiritual sense with the living organisms which belong to the park: animals, plants, sacred places, and the unseen spirits which are believed to inhabit it. Though entrance to the park is extremely limited, one may encounter both Kofán people and campesinos in the various communities around it, plus those stemming from the high Putumayo, and the *pasto* and *quillacinga* peoples of Narino department.

## Yaigojé Apaporis



*PNN Photo*

A *resguardo* which is a legally-recognised and collectively-owned indigenous territory. The only Colombian region which has been declared a National Natural Park (PNN) at the express request of the communities living there. It was officially declared Colombia's 55th, and the third largest, national protected area, in October 2009. Access is restricted to science based tours by special permission.

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