

SPRING GETAWAYS

Don't let confusing weather stop you from enjoying March break with your kids, **T4**



TRAVEL



SHEREEN MROUEH/G ADVENTURES

Postcard-perfect Cartagena boasts tiled roofs, medieval cobblestone streets and restored 300-year-old colonial buildings in shades of ochre and dusty rose.

Colombia's changing face of tourism

Long associated with war and drugs, country becoming top hub for intrepid travellers

VAWN HIMMELSBACH
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

COLOMBIA—I'm holding coca leaves in each hand, between my thumb and first two fingers. As instructed, I give thanks to Mother Earth and attempt to toss the leaves into the sacred lake (though they blow back and hit me in the face).

Standing here, in the jungles of Colombia's Sierra Nevada, it's hard to believe this slice of paradise was, until quite recently, one of the most brutally violent regions in the world — thanks in part to those coca leaves.

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is the highest coastal mountain range in the world, jutting straight out of the Caribbean Sea. The land is still inhabited by several indigenous tribes, though many of its current residents, such as Juan Sebastian Correa, fled to Bogota during the civil war. Correa, who is now 28, returned to Sierra Nevada five years ago and now runs an eco-tourism company, Sierra Ne-

vada Mágica, showing travellers like me his culture's traditions.

For Correa, the coca leaf is revered, not reviled. "The coca leaf is a plant that is very sacred in South America," he says. "It is a symbol of the Mother Earth and the symbol of female energy in nature."

In the Kogi tribe, for example, men chew coca leaves to get in touch with their feminine energy.

Most other people use coca leaves in their synthesized form: cocaine. And probably not to get in touch with their feminine energy.

Colombia is often associated with the three Cs: coffee, cocaine and civil war. (Or maybe four: cartels.) The country has a long-running history of internal conflict involving guerrilla and paramilitary groups with various acronyms like FARC, ELN and AUC. And it's still the top producer of cocaine in the world.

"The coca leaf is a plant that is very sacred in South America. It is a symbol of the Mother Earth and the symbol of female energy in nature."

JUAN SEBASTIAN CORREA
ECO-TOURISM
ENTREPRENEUR

COLOMBIA continued on T7

One-of-a-kind vacation a life-changing trip

Remote Ontario reserve invites a group of Canadians to be immersed in oft-overlooked culture

JENNIFER BAIN
TRAVEL EDITOR

Wanted: 25 intrepid travellers for Canada's most unique vacation.

The youth of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Innuwug First Nation (KI) are once again inviting people to experience life for a week on their remote, fly-in reserve in northwestern Ontario.

"When people travel, they don't just want to see new things, they want to be new themselves," says trip co-ordinator Andrée Cazabon, a Toronto filmmaker

with Productions Cazabon.

"They want to transform themselves through a trip. This is a life-changing trip — and it's also a lot of fun."

On the Reconciliation Trip itinerary: Truth-telling, active listening, bridge building (figuratively speaking), creating transformative relationships, fishing, swimming, games, community infrastructure visits, laughing.

You'll examine deep social issues, challenge stereotypes and racist attitudes, and explore reconciliation which, in a

Canadian context, "is about truth telling and about understanding our collective history together."

"Reconciliation is about righting the wrongs of the past that were done by Canada to indigenous people and creating a positive relationship together," Cazabon explains.

"It's also about understanding treaties and how we agreed to live in mutual respect."

FIRST NATION continued on T6



PRODUCTIONS CAZABON

Camille-Sophie, left, (here at age 12) has been coming to KI First Nation every year since the age of 7 with her mom, trip co-ordinator Andrée Cazabon.

The Cuba Specialist

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For outdoor adventurers, Colombia is paradise

COLOMBIA from T1

But after an aggressive anti-guerrilla crackdown that started in 2002, led by then-president Alvaro Uribe, Colombia is a lot safer these days — and it's becoming the hottest tourist destination in South America.

Indeed, Toronto-based adventure travel company G Adventures is experiencing 678-per-cent growth in Colombia, and has responded by increasing the number of its tours in the country by 475 per cent (with nine new trips, for a total of 13 itineraries).

Perhaps it's because the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism has been heavily promoting Colombia's "magic realism" abroad, or maybe it's the popularity of shows such as Netflix's *Narcos*. Or perhaps the word is finally getting out: Colombia is (relatively) safe and ready to prove it is more than coffee and cocaine.

Colombia is, in fact, one of the most bio-diverse countries on the planet, from its two coastlines (the Caribbean and the Pacific) to the lush Amazon basin and snow-capped peaks of the Andes and Sierra Nevada mountain ranges.

You don't have to be an avid bird-watcher to appreciate Colombia is home to one-fifth of all bird species on Earth. There are jaguars, anacondas, giant anteaters, spider monkeys, three-toed sloths, the world's largest rodent capybara (at around 48 centimetres in height) and the rare pink-hued Amazon river dolphin.

And Colombia boasts some of the

largest intact coral reefs in the Americas. There are 55 national parks here, as well as a number of private parks — though some are still unsafe, due to guerrilla or drug activity (check before going).

Colombia is one of the most bio-diverse countries on the planet, from its two coastlines to the Amazon basin and snow-capped peaks of the Andes mountain range

For outdoor adventurers, it's paradise: kitesurfing along the Caribbean coast, paragliding in Bucaramanga, diving off Islas de San Bernardo, Class IV and V white-water rafting in San Gil, and world-class trekking in the mountains (including the challenging five-day trek to Ciudad Perdida, the Lost City, to see the ruins of the Tayrona civilization).

The Pacific coast, with its black-sand beaches, was once off-limits to tourists, thanks to La Violencia, the period of civil war from 1948 to 1958.

Now it's opening up, with beach towns, surf spots and whale watching, and the opportunity to dive with hundreds of hammerhead sharks (if that's your thing).

Colombia is also the birthplace of literary Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose novels evoke Colombia's magic realism, and a bastion of salsa music — you can dance the night away in clubs all over the country, though Cali and Barranquilla are salsa hot spots. Then there's Cartagena, considered the most beautiful colonial city in South America, and the lush coffee plantations around Medellin, the "City of Eternal Spring."

Whether zipping through the streets of Bogota in a cab with Pitbull's *El Taxi* at top volume, or swimming in a sacred lake in the jungles of Sierra Nevada, it's hard not to feel like you're in a Marquez novel — where something magical can happen at any moment. And you realize there's a whole lot more to Colombia than the three Cs.

Vawn Himmelsbach's trip was sponsored by G Adventures, which didn't review or approve this story.



VAWN HIMMELSBACH PHOTOS

About 50 kilometres from Cartagena is Volcan de Lodo El Totumo. Its crater is filled with mud acclaimed for its therapeutic properties.

> WHEN YOU GO

How to get there

Avianca (avianca.com) offers daily flights from Toronto to Bogota, via San Salvador. Air Canada (aircanada.com) has direct and indirect options to Bogota. Avianca also has an extensive network of domestic flights to 23 cities in Colombia.

When to go

Colombia lies near the equator, so the weather is fairly consistent year-round (hot and humid on the Caribbean coast, damp and cool in high-altitude Bogota).

That means you can travel year-round, though the busiest seasons are Semana Santa (Holy Week, March 20-27 this year), December and January. Several tour operators offer trips throughout the year.

Safety

While some people envision being kidnapped by guerrillas and held for ransom in the jungle, these days Colombia is a safer bet than some of its neighbours.

That being said, there are dodgy areas best avoided: deep in the Amazon, near the Darien Gap and along the Venezuelan border (basically, anywhere that drugs are crossing borders). The biggest threat to most travellers is petty theft.

Zika virus

The Public Health Agency of Canada (travel.gc.ca) has issued a travel health notice for the Zika virus infection in the Americas. Pregnant women and those considering becoming pregnant should discuss travel plans with their health care provider.

FARC facts

Do you have to worry about FARC? The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia is a Marxist-Leninist rebel group that opposes multinational corporations and the U.S. influence in Colombia. Though it claims to represent the rural poor, it's funded primarily through illicit drugs and ransom kidnappings. Membership has rapidly declined since the crackdown in 2002, but FARC still exists in remote pockets of the country — areas most travellers avoid.

Take a tour

G Adventures (gadventures.com) offers 13 tours that visit Colombia, ranging from \$799 for a seven-day trip to \$19,999 for a 38-day cruise that travels of the west coast of South America.

DAVE'S CRUISE DESTINATIONS

MEDITERRANEAN



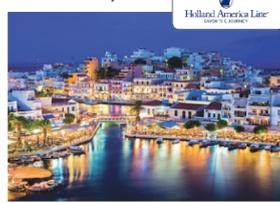
Dave Frinton
Co-Founder
& President
CruisePlus

I'm still promoting the Med this week! This is a 14 night package aboard the gorgeous, brand new, 2600 passenger ms Koningsdam departing on April 12. You'll fly roundtrip Toronto, have 2 nights in a 4 star hotel in Rome before boarding the ship for 12 nights cruising in a desirable balcony stateroom to Olympia, Athens, Istanbul (overnight), Ephesus, Rhodes, Crete and Pompeii. The price is only **\$2899 CAD** pp also including an onboard credit and all taxes. You can extend this cruise by another 12 nights with Sicily, Sardinia, Gibraltar, Seville, Malaga, Cartagena and an overnight in Barcelona. The 26 night package (balcony, air, OBC and taxes) is only **\$4599 CAD** pp. Or, just

take the 12 night second half of the cruise (which means you'll

fly on April 24), and this 14 night package is also a deal (with the similar inclusions) for only **\$2999 CAD** pp.

Transatlantics, the Med and Northern Europe/Baltic are where the bargains are this spring and summer (around \$1000 per person less than last year), and with these prices in Canadian dollars makes now the time to take advantage!



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Tuesday March 22

Stratford Kitchener Arden Park - 552 Ontario Street 10:30 am
Holiday Inn - 30 Fairway Road South 3:00 pm

Wednesday March 23

Simcoe Brantford Rec Centre - 182 South Drive 10:30 am
Best Western - 19 Holiday Drive 3:00 pm

Thursday March 24

Barrie Orillia Holiday Inn - 20 Fairview Road 10:30 am
Mariposa Inn - 400 Memorial Ave. 3:00 pm

Monday March 28

St. Catharines Holiday Inn - 327 Ontario Street 3:00 pm

Tuesday March 29

Guelph Orangeville Holiday Inn - 601 Scottsdale Drive 10:30 am
Best Western - 7 Buena Vista Drive 3:00 pm

Wednesday March 30

Toronto Oshawa Botanical Gardens - 777 Lawrence Ave. E. 10:30 am
Quality Hotel - 1011 Bloor St. East 3:00 pm

Thursday March 31

Peterborough Belleville Best Western - 84 Lansdowne St.E. 10:30 am
Fairfield Inn - 407 North Front Street 3:00 pm

(See other dates and places on website)

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Worried about your security? These days, Colombia is a safer bet than some of its neighbours.