



# THE CORN FLAKE TRAVELLER IN COLOMBIA



I had been travelling around South America for 18 months when I decided to go to Colombia. I had missed previous opportunities to see the country because I had been scared off by its reputation as a country full of dangerous people and bandits wanting to kidnap you. I decided to go in May 2005 after speaking to fellow travellers who had no problems travelling there and because I felt more confident that my Spanish speaking was at a suitable enough level to get myself out of any trouble.

I flew from Buenos Aires, spent a few days in Bogota then flew north to Santa Marta, where I arranged to go on a 6 day jungle trek to 'la Ciudad Perdida' the ruins of a lost city. On the night before the trip I was sat with an Israeli friend who told me about the group of tourists that were kidnapped on the same tour a few years ago and how he felt scared in a similar way to before he went to the Palestinian border during his Israeli army days.

Day 1 - In the morning we met another 7 or 8 travellers, then we all jumped in a big square truck and were driven towards the jungle, arriving about 2 hours later in a tiny village at the end of the road. Before setting off the guide gave me a big plastic bag full of marijuana and said I was in charge of keeping the group stoned, I couldn't stop laughing as he told me that the price included weed when paying for the tour but I thought he was joking.

We walked for about 4 hours, having to climb a really steep hill, which was hard work but worth it for the views of endless rainforest and forest covered hills. The jungle is amazing; such dense vegetation and so full of life, you can't see the animals but you can hear them. We stopped to take a break from hiking, eat fresh pineapple and swim in little rivers to prevent heat exhaustion, it was so incredibly hot, humid and sweaty. After more hours of sweaty hiking we arrived at our camp and were shown to our hammocks. I went for a walk and loved the feeling that I was deep in the jungle in the middle of Colombia, it felt like a very cool thing to do, as did swinging in my hammock listening to the jungle and its rampant noise.

In the evening the guide told us that we could take an extra excursion in the morning as he knew a farmer and could arrange a visit to his cocaine factory. We were told that we would set off early in the morning so it wouldn't affect our progress and if people didn't want to they could sleep in and miss it. We had a vote by showing hands; nobody chose to stay in bed.

Day 2 - I slept very well in the hammock, although I was murdered by the mossies and, as planned, we started walking through the jungle early, still half asleep. I found it quite surreal to be following a little 9 year old girl to a cocaine factory and I couldn't help but feel a bit worried that we were going to be ambushed.

After 15 minutes we came to a big army tent covering a concrete floor and met an old man who was sat there chewing on some grass. He gave us a 2 hour demonstration on how they turn leaves into a white powder, going through step by step as they soak the leaves in gasoline, then remove the leaves and treat the gasoline with a series of different combinations of acids, salts, alkali's and water. On the last step he was holding up a beaker and stirring the liquid inside as a white solid formed in the bottom. I was the only one who spoke Spanish so I did all the translating and it felt like a personal lesson as he would explain to me, then I would tell the group. The final product that formed was base, 80% cocaine and only for smoking as we hadn't performed the final step, where you further purify it to around 95% by adding ether and letting it evaporate. It was like being back at school in a science lesson with test tubes and different chemicals.

The farmer was really genuine and down to earth, not rich like I'd imagined he would be, I couldn't stop asking questions and he ended up giving us a lot of fascinating information about the cocaine trade and the corruption involved.

He told us how growing cocaine is easier than coffee or any legal crops because the cartels provide the land, they bribe the government to obtain all the required licences and the entire product is taken off their hands as soon as it's ready, so no hassle selling.



Hardly any of the money made stays in Colombia and most of what does, stays in the hands of rich cartels, the actual farmers struggle to get by. He told us that it leaves in huge quantities on ships and that officials that could stand in its way along its path are paid off, including armies, police and government officials in the U.S and Colombia. He seemed quite upset about the fact that those very same government officials also provide financial support to destroy large areas of the jungle and weapons to combat the 'drug trade'. The cartels make so much exporting that they even have 'cleaners' - people who kill members of the Colombian public if they have a habit and waste too much valuable export.

It's really easy to grow as it grows like a weed and loves sun, rain and heat. It is really easy to harvest as you just pull the leaves off, leaving a stalk that replenishes within 3-5 months, but apparently you need a kilo of leaves to produce a gram of cocaine. We gave him a tip, then he told me that he would have to sell around 80 kilos of base to make that amount of money. Such a fascinating excursion.

We went back to the camp for some breakfast then set off hiking through the jungle again, walking about 2 ½ hours until we reached an indigenous village inhabited by the Kogi people. They speak their own language, wear beige all in one outfits and have long dark hair, like I imagined Amazonian Indians to look. They really looked the part in the jungle but it was difficult to distinguish between the girls and the boys as they all looked the same. We visited a school, met some families and visited their homes. They seemed like very peaceful people, completely self-sufficient, living a very relaxed lifestyle; no dramas, no worries. They're not interested in the outside world, except we did take them some sugar, they asked for our spare plastic bottles and most of them were wearing wellington boots.

After a few hours in the village we continued on

until we arrived at our camp for the night, where we chilled in hammocks and swam in the river.

Day 3 - We hiked uphill for an hour, downhill for an hour then spent an hour following a river until we came to some really old, moss covered steps. We stopped and had a quick break before starting to climb the 1200 steps that lead away from the river, through the jungle and up the mountain.

It was really steep and pretty difficult in the hot, humid climate but we were treated to some fantastic views and it was great to feel like Indiana Jones trekking through the jungle to a lost city. Once at the top we "checked in" to the tree house and just wandered around exploring the ruins for the rest of the day. The ruins were great, especially when the sun was going down, although this was when the battle against the mosquitos began. It was great to be able to stretch out on a mattress that evening, I do love sleeping in hammocks but can't deny it's hard to sleep when shaped like a banana.

Day 4 - I woke up early to watch the sun rise, which was spectacular watching the light and the shadows change in the valley below. We had a 3 hour walk around the site with our guide, who showed us all sorts of things and told us about the history, starting with its origin with the Tayrona people in A.D 500. There were maps carved into some of the rocks, ceremonial areas, areas used to grow food and there were some serious efforts to deal with water run-off, I'm guessing all the rain they have in the rainforest.

We spent time exploring the site then some time relaxing in the tree house where the guide told us he was the guide when the FARC guerrillas kidnapped those tourists a few years ago. He told us about what happened to him when they tied him up and tricked the tourists into leaving with them, saying they were 'Special Police'. He said they were good people who treated the hostages well and that they did it to speak to the world





via the Red-Cross and the U.N to say that they are a political movement not terrorists. It was another great moment as it got dark in the Colombian jungle and we listened to all his stories.

We had some dinner with some Kogi people, it feels quite normal to be amongst them now, they are very friendly, tranquil people. I then had to use a knife to cut some little insects out of my arm, which like my body, was covered in mosquito bites. Later in the evening it became quite chilly, which was really refreshing after days of intense heat.

Days 5 and 6 - We started early and it was a right pain in the arse coming down the 1200 steps in the pouring rain. We re-traced our steps from days 2 and 3, the jungle was beautiful but had lost its novelty value after 4 days hiking through it. We eventually arrived back in the small village of Teyma to ride in the square truck back to Santa Marta to end our simply amazing trip.

From there I spent 4 days camping in Tayrona National Park before moving on to the pretty colonial city of Cartagena. I waited for days for some other tourists to materialise as I wanted to visit a mud volcano on a tour that required a minimum of 4 people. After 4 days and no tourists I had to take things into my own hands so I struck a deal with a guy who would take me the 50km, wait there while I climbed in and then take me back on his moto-taxi, all for \$17.

We arrived and there was a 10 or 15m high, coned shaped hillock with a circular pool of mud at the top; the top of a thin tube of liquid mud which goes down 1.5km into the earth. I got in and had a swim around, completely covering myself in the mud which is supposed to

have medicinal benefits. After half an hour of soaking up minerals I was washed by a washer woman for a small charge before jumping back on the moto-taxi. Annoyingly the bike broke down on the way back and we had to take it to a mechanic, I put it down as another tick off the list.

I got back to Cartagena just in time to catch the 5pm night bus to Cali. I was a little nervous as this was supposed to be the most dangerous route in terms of kidnappings so I took some Valium to help me sleep.

I stayed in Cali for a week mingling with the locals and practising my Spanish and I had one of those random travel moments. I was relaxing in my hostel when a fashion designer came and asked me and my friend Lee Keyrear if we would model for her in a fashion show. We agreed, thinking 'why not' and then completely forgot about it. Four days later she picked us up at 4pm and took us to her apartment for a bit of training on how to walk like a model: eyes looking at the horizon, walk to the end, wait 2 or 3 seconds and then walk back again, that sort of thing.

After our quick lesson we drove to a little town about an hour south and straight to a huge building with a big crowd of people outside, I thought we would be modelling in front of a room full of grandmas in a little church or something, but I was wrong. While being intimidated by the crowd size she said we had to walk down a 23m catwalk, that it was live on 2 TV stations and that the room would be full of an audience of 500 or 600 people, including a host of photographers.

Like with the Radio interview in Peru I now found myself in deep doo-doo and there was no way I could get out

of it. We were taken to the back and I don't think either of us spoke for half an hour as we were surrounded by lovely looking Colombian ladies who weren't exactly shy about exposing significant amounts of their bodies. Two stunners in bikini's started using the same mirror as me, putting on makeup and I almost fainted. We were decorated with makeup and dressed in our outfits; mine was a nice brown pair of trousers, a feminine looking shirt and a feather bower around my neck.

While queuing for my catwalk debut, I could see a huge room full of flashing lights, cameras and people. My sphincter muscle started sending funny signals to my brain, then just before I went on I was asked to carry a water pistol and pretend to fire it at the cameras. My moment came and I walked along the catwalk, reached the end and stood, in what I thought was a cool pose, and fired water at the cameras. People even clapped, although I don't think they were clapping at me, then I walked backstage to all my naked fans. After all her clothes had been shown off we did a kind of lap of honour, as all the models walked out in a little convoy to the end of the catwalk and back again.

A brilliant experience, absolutely brilliant, I bought the brown trousers at a discounted price. She then took a bunch of us to a bar and bought us some drinks before driving us back to Cali, where me and Lee ended up in a club.

A week later I flew back to Buenos Aires to continue my trip around South America. For more details about my trips you can visit my blog, visit my facebook page or buy my book (*The Adventures of a Hard-up, Diabetic Traveller with a Corn Flake Problem*). For any of these you can google "Mick Hobday Corn Flakes".