

travel & escapes

FORKS & THE ROAD

South Africa's Western Cape Province is renowned for its natural beauty and bounty. Table Mountain is the dominant splendour in Cape Town, the legislative capital of the country, but a mere half-hour drive away is the Cape Winelands district, the gourmet capital. Stellenbosch, the heart of South Africa's wine industry, is steeped in history with canal lined avenues, giant oak trees and beautifully preserved historic buildings. Dorp Street has the longest rows of surviving old buildings in any major town in southern Africa. The Stellenbosch Wine Routes boast more than 150 wineries in total and wine tourism is big business here. Most of the wineries offer wine sampling and tours but many go beyond. For example, Vredenheim has a Big Cats Park, Hidden Valley offers bird watching, Blauwklippen has a distillery and bistro, at De Zalze there's golf and at Jordan fly-fishing. Clos Malverne and Spier have spas, Stellenrust and Thelema have hiking trails, and there's horseback riding at Morgenhof and Waterkloof Estate. At Lanzerac, I had a premium pairing of five wines with five different-flavoured chocolates. The unusual matches worked well and the chocolate lovers among us were in heaven. In their deli, visitors could buy fresh-baked breads, cheese and charcuterie platters, as well as picnic baskets filled with goodies to be enjoyed in the garden overlooking the vineyards. Every year, Stellenbosch holds a three-day lifestyle festival that showcases hundreds of Stellenbosch wines from big producers to small boutiques, gourmet food offerings by top restaurants, live music and fun outdoor activities. The 2016 dates are Feb. 5-7. stellenboschwinefestival.co.za

Margaret Swaine,
Weekend Post



CLIVID VIA FLICKR

A natural cloud forest, Cocora is known for its wax palms, the tallest palm trees in the world and the only ones that can be found this far from the sea.

Art of the surreal

A tour of Colombia proves a worthy and slightly magical alternative to the more traversed Caribbean islands for a warm winter getaway

BY ALYSSA SCHWARTZ

Of all my local encounters in Colombia, the one I didn't expect was the frog. Nearly the size of my full hand, the frog was tucked next to the light switch of my outdoor toilet, so still and such a perfect match for pale wooden walls of my thatched beach hut that when I spotted him after flicking on the light to brush my teeth, I thought he was a carving.

But this was Colombia — land of magical realism, dense jungles full of exotic (and sometimes poisonous) flora and fauna, and the Coco Loco, a frothy coconut-lemonade drink generously spiked with rum, of which I'd just had two — all of which conspired to make me less sure than I would have liked to be that the frog was merely decorative. Made of tree branches, the walls of my hut made for no real delineation between outside and in, and while sharing a bathroom with a giant frog didn't rattle me, the idea of waking up to find my new friend in my bed was a bit more than I could handle. The insect music and other jungle sounds were rhythmic enough to lull me into a trance; before I knew it, I'd been staring at the frog for more than 15 minutes, watching for the slightest sign of life. Eventually I gave up and went to bed.

This wasn't the first time during my weeklong Colombian adventure that I wondered if what I was experiencing was real. The colourful old city of Cartagena is packed with cruise ship day-trippers (it's charming, regard-less) and Bogota is seeing an upswing of visitors (and a slew of new luxury hotels to satisfy the demands). But I'd come to Colombia seeking an off-the-radar alternative to the Caribbean islands — and I got it in spades; most of my Intrepid Travel journey, which brought my group to the mountainous Zona Cafetera and this isolated stretch of Caribbean coast close to the Venezuelan border, felt so magically untouched and off the beaten track it was wondrously dreamlike.

The second morning after we arrived in Colombia, my group awoke in Salento, a lively colonial market town at the centre of the country's coffee-growing region, and we were whisked off in a pair of open-topped jeeps bound for the Cocora Valley. ("There's just one rule today," our guide said, seeing us off for the tour. "No standing in the jeeps.") As soon as we rounded the first bend out of town and found ourselves alone on a windy, mountain road

surrounded by dazzling green valleys spotted with white and brown cows, we promptly forgot her instructions.) A natural cloud forest, Cocora is known for its wax palms, the tallest palm trees in the world and the only ones that can be found this unexpectedly far from the sea. A 14-kilometre hike through the reserve took us across shaky suspension bridges and past ferocious waterfalls along the valley floor, and up more than 1,000 metres of wooded trail flanked by round, speckled red mushrooms that reminded me of the fungus that sent Alice to Wonderland.

Stopping at Acaime, a hummingbird sanctuary along the way, we drank aguapanela, a hot tea made from sugarcane juice, into which we dipped pieces of salty pressed cow's milk cheese per the local tradition, as the colourful buzzing birds floated around us drinking the same sweet concoction — minus the cheese — from feeders which dangled from the trees. Refuelled, we continued our trek upwards to Finca la Montana, a farm 2,860 metres above sea level, where a pair of majestic white horses grazed among fuchsia and coral-coloured wildflowers, looking straight out of the illustrations of so many fairy tales read to me when I was a child.

It was a more practical sort of magic that we encountered two hours north at Hacienda Venecia, the 100-year-old family-owned coffee farm that was our next stop. There, we tasted the sweet, fruity pulp of fresh-picked coffee cherries and sniffed the yeasty fermenting waft of the washing stage as we traced the processing chain from plant to pulp. As we all sat around a table sorting green coffee beans by hand in search of imperfections, Juan Pablo, the farm's owner, gave us a brief, impromptu course in Colombian geography and history. "Ten years ago, you couldn't have done the walk you did yesterday," he said, referring to our Cocora Valley hike and the guerrilla and drug violence that made Colombia so dangerous for so long. "But we have a new country now." That's not to say travellers visiting Colombia don't have to take basic precautions, but the regions we visited are safe enough to travel without the fear of yore, and safe enough that my friend Matt and I could wander the hilly dirt roads around the farm unaccompanied when our barista course broke for a few hours after lunch. When we accidentally wandered onto the sprawling grounds of a nearby private home, the owner loaded us up with more mangoes and tangerines than we could carry before

sending us back on our way.

In fact, that frog was the only local encounter of the trip that made me feel the least bit unnerved. But fresh back in my room after a long midnight walk down the beach, I had to admit this ruggedness was part and parcel of the place. Just moments before, as we strolled along the water guided by only the light of the moon, we'd wagered on how many years it would be before this pristine real estate would be crowded with all-inclusives and luxury resorts. We all agreed it couldn't be long.

When I woke up the next morning, my froggy friend was gone. I imagine that soon the undiscovered magic will be, too.

Weekend Post

IF YOU GO

Tour Intrepid Travel's eight-day Café Colombia itinerary takes travellers from Bogota to the mountainous Zona Cafetera and on to coastal Cartagena, and includes all accommodations, and some activities and meals. From \$2,050 Canadian. (Our final stop in Playa Koralia, near Santa Marta, is part of sister tour operator Peregrine's 13-day Colombia Independent Journey offering, from C\$5,855.)

Flight Air Canada offers non-stop flights to Bogota four times weekly. LAN offers daily flights connecting through Miami.

DAVE'S CRUISE DESTINATIONS

Panama Canal



Dave Frinton
Co-Founder
& President
CruisePlus

Panama Canal cruise itineraries are relaxing, yet very interesting — and is a nice mix of seeing the sites and enjoying the fine dining, entertainment and amenities while at sea. We have a great deal on a spring departure on the ms Amsterdam. This 22 night package (departing April 29) includes a \$600 CAD travel credit (which can be used towards insurance, air & other add-ons) to Fort Lauderdale, one night (4 star) hotel, an onboard credit and all taxes in a nicely located ocean-view stateroom for \$3999 CAD pp. We have similar pricing for the 2 day shorter ms Maasdam sailing on May 2.

The gorgeous and modern ms Nieuw Amsterdam departs Vancouver on October 4 with ports including Astoria, San Francisco, Cabo San Lucas, Huatulco, Puerto Chiapas, Costa Rica, Columbia and their stunning private island in the Bahamas before arriving in Fort Lauderdale. Our package price for a balcony, including a \$850 CAD travel credit, 1 night hotel, an onboard credit and all taxes is \$5499 CAD pp. Demand is very high for this sailing, so don't wait too long!



TRANSATLANTIC & MED

24 nights - ms Eurodam
March 26, 2016

— balcony stateroom (high category)
— 1 night pre cruise + 2 nights
Barcelona hotel
— \$750 CAD p. person travel credit
— all taxes & more

\$3749 CAD*

CARIBBEAN

15 nights - ms Nieuw Amsterdam
February 20, 2016

— balcony stateroom
— 1 night pre cruise (4 star) hotel
— \$600 CAD per person travel credit
— all taxes & more

\$3099 CAD*



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