

DEERFIELD

MAGAZINE

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“¡CUESTIÓNENLO TODO!”



¡CUESTIÓNENLO TODO!

{Question Everything!}

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID THIEL



xpecting something foreign, we find something familiar. Arriving in Bogota, our guide talks about the stereotypes: that one half of town is wealthy and safe and beautiful, and that the other is poor and uneducated—dangerous and dirty. It's not true, he says, but the perception persists. Bogota is a mountain city—above 8000 feet—and for a long time remained undiscovered to outsiders because of its isolation. Today, it's pushing past the assumptions of its history and finding its way into the modern world.

And so it is with Colombia. The uninitiated think of drugs and violence—and perhaps of Juan Valdez. But beyond those assumptions about crime and coffee farmers, the reality is quite different. The Colombian people are warm and engaging, interested, and smart. The landscape is astonishingly beautiful and diverse. Travel is easy and safe. Colombia today is vibrant and modern and multifaceted—with each of its regions hosting a distinct culture.

WHAT ARE THE SECRETS OF SURVIVAL IN SUCH A DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENT?

THE RAINFOREST

Afloat in a lagoon on the Amazon, thirteen students listen intently to jungle sounds that are louder than any cityscape. They have paddled out in total darkness, with the goal of seeing caiman and a certain orchid that only blooms at night. But so far, it's the sounds that have been illuminating. With a stunning Milky Way overhead, they listen.

The guide intones advice that benefits from years of living in this borderless expanse. *Escuchen*. "The jungle is like a house. If you respect it and behave in it, it will do the same for you. Treat the jungle well and it will do the same for you." He identifies the sounds of the place, from the bugs to the frogs to the birds and the monkeys, helping the students distinguish each one. Despite the temperature, the darkness, and the astonishing haze, it is rapture. But when the guide reaches down and pulls a young gator from the water—it's eyes aflame with our reflected headlamps—the danger of this place becomes apparent. What are the secrets of survival in such a difficult environment?

"Heads turned and excited whispers could be heard between our group of two boats as we approached the still figure on the surface of the water." —Andrew Hollander '16



THE MOUNTAINTOP

We started our hike in a rainforest, but now, at 13,000 feet, the temperature has dropped and the air is thin. A steady wind is gusting at 40mph, with pelting rain. Exposed on the steep, treeless, rocky landscape, the group huddles for a few minutes, deciding whether to press on to a sacred lagoon or turn back to the forest below. Despite the youth and vigor of the students, it has been a difficult climb; some have already turned around. One student, determined, climbs just a couple steps at a time, pausing to rest with every few feet gained. *Estamos cansados*. Is the difficulty of this climb part of why the lagoon is so sacred? Is the suffering part of the ritual?

IS THE DIFFICULTY OF THIS CLIMB PART OF WHY THE LAGOON IS SO SACRED? IS THE SUFFERING PART OF THE RITUAL?

“Not much time had passed before my body was letting me know through cramping and sweating that the hike would be the most challenging experience of my life...both mentally and physically.” —Bri’ana Odom ’15

“The walls were incredible; lamps surrounded them, basking the buildings on the edge with a warm yellow light that contrasted with the black night. Just a street away was the ocean.”

—Helena Tebeau ’17

THE WALLED CITY

Walking in Cartagena, the city is vibrant with nightlife. This Caribbean tourist spot remains mostly undiscovered—and, so, unspoiled—by foreigners. Instead, here is a mix of Colombian cultures on holiday. People of every color and from every environment mix: the people and the cityscape manifest the vitality of Colombia and its readiness to emerge as a leading nation in South America. Still, this modern landscape is ensconced within a Spanish colonial city. The walls and parapets that now attract tourists are themselves a symbol of unwelcome visitors, of exploitation, and of oppression. How do Colombians reconcile the colonial past with the opportunities of their future?

HOW DO COLOMBIANS RECONCILE THE COLONIAL PAST WITH THE OPPORTUNITIES OF THEIR FUTURE?

THE PLANTATION

In the coffee region, the students are provided a carefully orchestrated tasting and a tour—complete with games, prizes, and demonstrations of “authentic” handicrafts. The farm is beautiful, and the owners are eager to show it. The espresso is delicious at first, but it leaves a bitter taste: the workers at this plantation receive less than \$2 for eight hours of harvesting. *Es mucho trabajo.* One of them, cycling to work two weeks ago, was killed in a traffic accident; without insurance or any safety net from his employer, his wife and children will have to find a way to survive. How does Colombia’s coffee prestige contribute to a system of exploitation, driven through the plantation system? And does “fair trade” really do anything to help?

HOW DOES COLOMBIA’S COFFEE PRESTIGE CONTRIBUTE TO A SYSTEM OF EXPLOITATION, DRIVEN THROUGH THE PLANTATION SYSTEM? AND DOES “FAIR TRADE” REALLY DO ANYTHING TO HELP?



THE PORT OF HAPPINESS

The people of Puerto Alegría used to survive by hunting jungle animals to feed their families—a practice now outlawed. Instead, they capture the animals and keep them for tourist photography, earning a few pesos for each pose. This practice is legal. Birds with clipped wings. Caiman with jaws strapped shut. Monkeys tied to tree stumps. A tree sloth, cuddled like a teddy in the arms of an elderly woman. And—horrifyingly—a manatee, endlessly circling the muddy water of a kiddie pool.

When asked about the manatee, the local guide provides a story about it being saved, injured, from a fisherman's net. *Es verdad*. A second question—not particularly probing—yields a slightly different story. A third question prompts an entirely new set of facts. The students wonder if their Spanish skills are at fault, but the adults in the group confirm that the story is shifting with each telling: the guide is telling us what he thinks we want to hear. Why? What's the real story and how could we uncover it?



WHAT'S THE
REAL STORY
AND HOW
COULD WE
UNCOVER IT?

“When I was speaking to Mario or Nixon in the Amazon, or to the man sitting on the steps of the Villa de Leyva church, I did not feel as if I were a foreigner interviewing a stranger.” —Megan Retana '15



THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Throughout our trip, our experiences have been wide ranging. We've learned about the culture of Colombia. We've been to a gold museum, and one about indigenous living in the Amazon, and one featuring a famous Colombian painter, and one about paleontology. We've visited the battleground where Colombia won its independence. We've hiked the mountains, picked coffee, woven baskets, and thrown pottery. We've learned “Leave No Trace” principles, how to fish, how to canoe, and how to stay healthy and hydrated along the way.

This trip is, ostensibly, a language trip, and students are expected to communicate primarily—and for some activities, exclusively—in Spanish. Hungry or thirsty, shopping or seeking directions, students' language skills improve dramatically because they are saturated with context. The imperatives of navigating an unfamiliar landscape provide an urgency that simply doesn't exist in a classroom.

This trip is also an environmental trip. Colombia is the second most bio-diverse country in the world (just behind Brazil, which is seven times larger), and its diversity of life comes from its diversity of environments. Colombia offers Caribbean coastline, cloud forest, rain forest, plantations, and farms; the center of the country hosts tall mountains, yet it has feet in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Every meal includes an unidentifiable fruit or vegetable. Even the array of animals we've encountered outstrips most American zoos. Add our experiences in the Amazon, conversations with the indigenous people, and lessons on how to handle and move about in indigenous canoes, and the effect is significant.

In two weeks, we have visited so much of Colombia—and we have learned so much of its history and place in the world—that we are final ready to learn the most important lessons of all. And that brings us to Palomino. *(continued on page 24)*

COLOMBIAN PARADOX *by Jaime Correa*

Colombia is a paradoxical country: famous for coffee and emeralds, but also for cocaine; well-known for the superior literary works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but also for the infamy of Pablo Escobar, arguably one of the worst criminals the world has ever known. It is renowned for its passion for soccer, but also for an interminable succession of armed conflicts, the last of which has pitted the State against communist guerrilla groups for fifty years now. Colombia has spent an enormous amount of energy striving to find stability and to build its own identity—attempting to come to terms with its own idiosyncrasies through a long and painful process of trial and error.

Located in the northernmost corner of South America, the territory occupied by modern-day Colombia has always had strategic importance on the continent. In ancient times, it was a passageway for people and goods circulating across the Americas. By the time the Europeans arrived, many indigenous peoples inhabited vast areas of Colombia. Their social, economic, and political organization was rather complex, even though none of them had yet attained the technological sophistication of the Aztecs, the Mayas or the Incas.

The geography of Colombia has greatly determined its destiny. The Andes Mountains, the backbone of South America, split into three massive cordilleras when they get to Colombia. This particularity, due to cataclysmic geological events, fragmented the territory and isolated Colombians from each other, and from the rest of the world for most of the nation's history. Travel within the country used to be so difficult that most areas developed independently and ended up building strong regional identities, as well as inter-regional rivalries, which have always made Colombia a difficult nation to govern.

The history of modern-day Colombia starts with the arrival of Spanish Conquistadors at the end of the 15th century. At first, the Spaniards were more interested in plundering than in settling the New World. After eight hundred years of continuous warfare against the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, the Spanish mind-set of the time was rather bellicose. Right from the start, the Conquistadors treated the indigenous people as infidels to be either converted to Catholicism or eradicated. In addition to that, Spain became in the 16th century the spearhead of the Counter-Reformation, a movement that sought to stop the spread of the Protestant Reformation. As a result, the conquest and colonization of Colombia, as well as that of other Latin American countries, was a process marked by gruesome violence but also by extreme religious zeal.

The Spaniards exported to their colonies their stratified social system. At first, the Crown and the Catholic Church opposed marriages between Spaniards and Native American women. However, since the first settlers

were mostly men, the “pure blood” of the Spaniards got mixed with indigenous blood very early on. With the import of scores of African slaves during colonial times, Colombia became a melting pot where Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans blended not only their genes but also their cultures to give birth to a country of mestizos. In spite of this, the Spanish Crown put into effect a stern caste system that privileged the Spaniards, a minority, and was detrimental to mestizos, sambos and mulattos. Overall, the colonial caste system created a racist and elitist society, a type of inequitable social organization that still afflicts Colombia to this day.

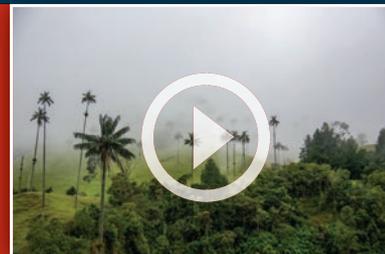
Colombia became independent from Spain in the first two decades of the 19th century. The ruling classes were somewhat ill-prepared to govern the new nation. They weren't able to agree on how to rule the country, either. Two opposing political views emerged: centralism and federalism. Over the years, centralists and federalists became the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party, respectively. Throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries these two political parties opposed each other, not only at democratic elections but also through a series of grisly civil wars. The last of these wars, known as La Violencia (1946-1958), claimed the lives of at least 200,000 people.

The extreme polarization between conservatives and liberals persisted and, in the context of the Cold War, became a central feature of the fierce fighting that broke out between the State and Communist Guerrilla Groups after the 1960s. Rampant inequality and social injustice, as well as widespread corruption, were a catalyst for the emergence of several rebellious groups in the second half of the 20th century. The growth of the illegal drug business, which permeated Colombian society, and the involvement of paramilitary groups in the armed conflict, generated a very tense public order situation during the 1990s. However, Colombians reacted to this predicament and devised political ways to resolve some of their problems. For instance, there was a National Constituent Assembly in 1991 that created a new Constitution that was more modern, effective, and inclusive than the previous one.

Colombia has made significant progress in the first decades of the 21st century. Its economy has been growing steadily, and the government and the rebels are currently conducting peace talks that may end the armed conflict for good. However, there are still formidable challenges ahead. Post-conflict, Colombia will require nationwide forgiveness and reconciliation. It'll also provide an opportunity for the country to undertake much needed social reforms. Colombians ought to seize this favorable occasion to face their demons and to come to terms with the wrongs of their own history. Only by fully embracing its mestizo heritage, with all its complexities, riches, and contradictions, will Colombia be ready to write the new history the country so desperately desires. //

Mr. Correa studied film and television in Colombia, and then pursued master's degrees in Film Studies and Cultural Studies in Paris, where he remained for several more years as an English, French, and Spanish instructor. He came to Deerfield after returning to Bogota for five years to teach Spanish Literature and Cinema. Mr. Correa was one of the faculty members who accompanied Deerfield students to Colombia this past summer.

WATCH THE VIDEO: deerfield.edu/colombia



PALOMINO

Palomino is isolated. Far from other population centers in Colombia, it is on the coast, past miles of banana plantations, close to the border of Venezuela. Maria, one of our Colombian guides, shares that she's been doing service projects in this town as part of her studies in architecture: she's designed and built public toilets, rainwater catchment systems, and a community center. These structures are built from bamboo and thatch, with corrugated steel roofs. The community center was burnt down, so her group rebuilt it.

There is a gas station here, and extending from it along the roadway is an array of stores that constitute complete amenities: stands selling prepared food and ingredients, a church, a pharmacy, some repair shops, and a tavern. *¡Naranjas! ¡iguánabana! ¡tomate de árbol!* Trucks and motorcycles streak by, sometimes slowing as riders and pedestrians share a few words of greeting or commerce. You can just barely smell the sea.

The main road is busy, but the residential area is quiet. The houses are connected in long rows, with plaster exteriors and corrugated roofs; they are suspended between the gravity of the main road and a town square. Things are tidy, but there's little decoration; tropical plants and trees provide a bit of flowering shade. Most houses secret vibrant colors that have been dulled by the sun and wind-borne dust. Some are beyond repair, but some are freshly painted. The town has perhaps a few thousand residents.

Mr. Miller holds court in the bus before sending us out in the village. He reminds the students again of what he has been telling them all along: "Most of the questions you ask are terrible," he deadpans in his unique blend of wacky earnestness. Miller explains, for the umpteenth time, that asking "how are you?" is a great way to get a one-word answer. "That's a terrible question."

"What do you do?" Terrible. "Did you like it here?" Also terrible. "Do you like soccer?" That's the worst one yet.

"WHAT DO YOU DO?" TERRIBLE. "DID YOU LIKE IT HERE?" ALSO TERRIBLE. "DO YOU LIKE SOCCER?" THAT'S THE WORST ONE YET.

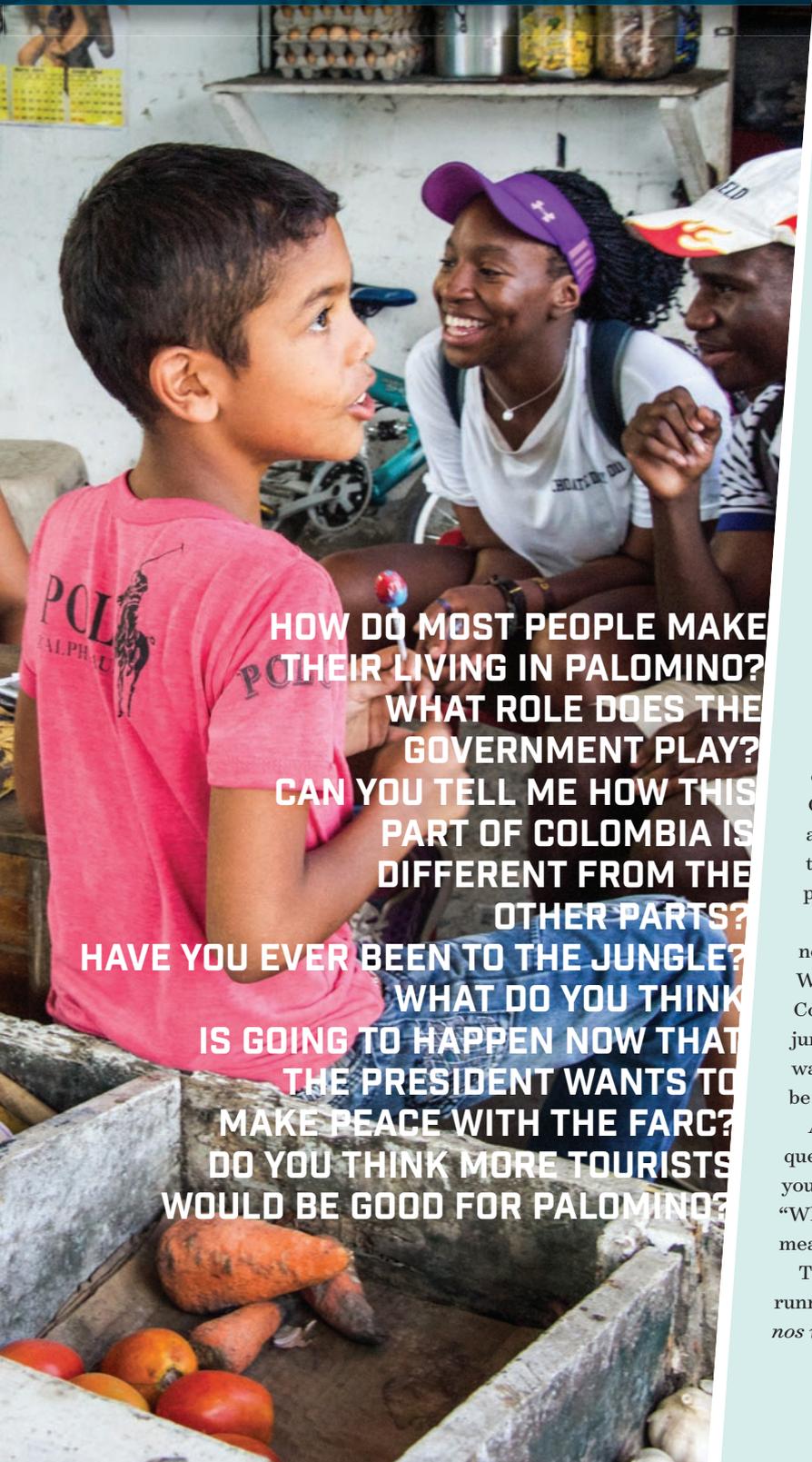


"At some point the experience shifted from a stiff interview to an informal, comfortable conversation. Maria shared with me stories about her three children, her husband, and her home in the next town over." —Serena Ainslie '16





"I needed to dig deeper, ask better questions, and make connections with people." —Kofi Adu '16



HOW DO MOST PEOPLE MAKE THEIR LIVING IN PALOMINO? WHAT ROLE DOES THE GOVERNMENT PLAY? CAN YOU TELL ME HOW THIS PART OF COLOMBIA IS DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER PARTS? HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO THE JUNGLE? WHAT DO YOU THINK IS GOING TO HAPPEN NOW THAT THE PRESIDENT WANTS TO MAKE PEACE WITH THE FARC? DO YOU THINK MORE TOURISTS WOULD BE GOOD FOR PALOMINO?

"If you want to know something real, you have to ask a real question. You have to care about the answer. Most people—tourists, yes, but also in daily life—ask questions when they really don't care about the answers. I urge you to do better."

So, he keeps the students sequestered inside the bus, practicing real questions. Questions that demonstrate empathy. Questions that will generate unexpected and unpredictable responses. Questions that show that the students care about the answers. He forces them to literally rehearse their questions with each other—perfecting the complex language of genuine inquiry, so they don't fall back on the drudgery of easy questions asked in rudimentary Spanish.

After twenty minutes or so, Mr. Miller allows the students to escape the bus. They wander in groups of four along the dusty streets, hesitantly seeking out locals for conversation. Small children approach and recede, testing the waters, and following them leads the students to open doors. Peeking in and knocking on the casement, residents respond with the astonishing warmth we all recognize as a hallmark of Colombians.

¡Hola! Come inside. *Siéntese usted.* Watch soccer with us. *¿Agua?*

This couldn't have happened previously on the trip. The students didn't know enough Spanish—and they weren't fluent enough to understand the replies. But most important, they weren't comfortable enough being uncomfortable with their surroundings. They didn't know enough about Colombia and Colombians.

The students are relieved to have rehearsed their questions on the bus just minutes ago, but they also suddenly realize that they have been rehearsing for this moment for two weeks. Their travels around Colombia have given them the gift of context. When they were on a scavenger hunt in Villa de Leyva, and when they were listening to the docents at the museum, they were gathering the information—and the linguistic confidence—to allow them to converse here, in a Palomino sitting room. When they were listening to the ranger at Puente Boyacá telling tallish tales of Simón Bolívar's great battles, and when they detected the lack of candor in Porto Allegria, they were tuning their senses to detect candor—and deflection. And when students spent two days with Colombian kids their own age they discovered that each had made assumptions about how the other—but neither group had anticipated the many things they share. The bus is filled with sound of kids singing pop music, pero, en español.

Now, suddenly, back in Palomino, the questions the students ask are not so terrible: How do most people make their living in Palomino? What role does the government play? Can you tell me how this part of Colombia is different from the other parts? Have you ever been to the jungle? What do you think is going to happen now that the President wants to make peace with the FARC? Do you think more tourists would be good for Palomino?

As the students get more comfortable, they run out of rehearsed questions. "Tell me about your family," says one. "What do you hope for your children?" asks another student. "What frightens you the most?" "What do you dream about?" After two weeks, easy conversation—and meaningful questions—have become natural to the students. Time flies.

The conversation ends when the Deerfield students realize they are running late. In those final moments of goodbye, a nod, *gracias, de nada, nos vemos.* //



DEERFIELD ACADEMY