



# Colombia Rising

After decades of civil war, a new peace deal has finally opened the country's remote interior to hardy travelers, making Colombia the hottest adventure destination on the planet.

BY AARON GULLEY



D

**ON'T FORGET** to shuffle your feet to scare off electric eels," says our fishing guide, Dani Herrera, as he wades upstream into the mirror-clear waters of Colombia's

Río Elvita, on the country's eastern flatlands, near the Venezuela border. Nothing in his voice suggests he's joking, so we follow him, holding our rods overhead with both arms when the river's current flows up to our necks.

A few hundred feet upriver, we clamber onto a sandy bank and begin casting into the shade beneath shrubby jaricales bushes growing over the banks. Rebekka Redd, a sponsored angler who jumped at the chance to come along on what would be her second trip to these waters, throws the first cast, and

after just a few tries, her line shrieks and she's battling what we've come here for: peacock bass, a technicolor beauty that grows up to 30 pounds. They are infamous for destroying lines and tackle when they strike, and, once hooked, can take an hour to land. Redd's is only a juvenile—five or six pounds—and she soon has it on land.

Next up is Bruce Mazur, a close friend of mine and lifetime fisherman, who quickly hooks and lands a second, bigger one. "All that stuff you learn over the years about sneaking up on the fish and trying to trick them with perfect casts—none of it matters here," marvels Bruce. "This is feral fishing, wild. You blast it out there and hold on tight."

After Bruce comes Juan Carlos Lenz, the software entrepreneur and fly-fishing fanatic

who brought us all together. After a few graceful throws, his line is buzzing and he's heaving against another fish. By the end of the afternoon, we'll have landed more than a dozen monster peacocks. Even I, a fly-fishing neophyte, hook one. Lenz grins when he returns from releasing his catch, a 13-pounder he fought for a scant 10 minutes. He beams and says simply, "Colombia."

You can fish for peacock bass from Florida to Brazil, Panama to Singapore, but until recently it was almost impossible to chase the

▲ Peacock bass, top, may be the world's toughest fighting fish. Even better, getting to them requires an adventure in its own right.



fish in Colombia, even though the country's rivers are teeming with them. For decades, the eastern half of the nation, a spiderweb of streams tumbling down from the Andes to the Orinoco and Amazon rivers, was controlled by separatist FARC rebels. This wild land is jungled and steamy and ideal for hiding, and guerrillas and drug traffickers drove most Colombians out of the region. It wasn't only in the east, either: the risk of fighting and kidnapping made travel outside of Bogotá, Medellín, and other major cities too dangerous for decades.

But after a landmark peace accord in late 2016, tensions in the country have eased and the outer regions are opening up to locals and tourists alike, who are flocking to the country in record numbers. Travelers are now exploring untouched seaside villages, birding and hiking trails in jungles that are among the most biodiverse on the planet, and high-alpine road and mountain bike rides that have forged a generation of the world's leading pro cyclists. Today, Colombia, in large



Colombia's civil war meant that the only reliable transport was small bush planes, and today that's still the primary method of travel in its eastern plains.

part because it was off-limits for so long, is fast becoming the world's most sought-after adventure destination.

In the flatlands, or *llanos*, part of what's drawing travelers is the pristine rivers. "In some ways, the FARC was good for the environment. They protected the land by keeping everyone off of it," says Lenz. "There was no illegal mining or commercial fishing because businesses wouldn't risk being out here."

Soft-spoken with a boyish face, Lenz, 50, knows this firsthand because he has been traveling in FARC-occupied hinterlands for decades. The son of a pilot, Lenz grew up flying and followed his father's example by enrolling in the Civil Air Patrol, a nonprofit collective of civilian pilots that use their small planes to transport doctors to remote regions. The organization flies 12 weekend brigades

each year, one per month, transporting 60 doctors each time. The pilots help where they can in the villages, but there's often downtime. So Lenz, who is as passionate about fly fishing as he is about flying, began packing along his rods and flies. On one trip, he landed at El Gavilán, a cattle ranch owned by a friend from Bogotá that's named for the hawks that frequent the skies here. He'd only brought a single lightweight rod, and when he tried fishing the Río Elvita, a peacock bass snapped off the tip on his first cast. He returned the following week with a 10-weight rod and reel.

"It was the best days of fishing of my life," Lenz remembers. "My arm was so sore, I was almost tired of fishing. Almost."

Through his fishing exploits, Lenz met Daniel Herrera, president of the largest fishing club in Colombia. A matchstick of a man



## Cycling | Coffee Country

For the past five seasons on the cycling circuit, Colombia has racked up more Grand Tour podiums (11) than any other country—which speaks not only to the caliber of Colombia's riders, but to the world-class terrain they have for cycling. And though Colombia is best known for its monstrous climbs, including Letras Pass, the world's longest road climb at 51.1 miles, there's far easier terrain in the country's Coffee Triangle, a rolling green landscape dotted with haciendas and chic guesthouses. The biking culture here is huge, and riding through it is like touring through a coffee version of Napa. Even better, an increasing number of operators run tours, including Trek Travel, which launched a six-day tour through the area for 2018.





## Surfing the Wild Coast

| Nuqui



Colombia's remote Pacific Coast, now increasingly easy to access, is like Costa Rica two decades ago, full of charming colonial towns and empty surf breaks. Family-run eco-lodges have taken root up and down the coast, including El Cantil, a cluster of bungalows hewn from the rain forest south of the town of Nuqui that offers jungle hikes, snorkeling gear for the house reef, and not a whole lot else. The visitor center at nearby Utria National Park is ideal for true off-the-gridders, including electricity-free rooms that are reached by a 5.5-mile hike from Nuqui (boat service is also available). And then there's El Almejal, a small lodge with a surf break out front and access to some of Nutria's best bird-watching territory. Getting to Nuqui requires a flight from Bogotá, but it's worth the connection.

with a face that's creased from years on the water, Herrera ran a fishing lodge in Costa Rica for more than a decade before recently returning to Colombia to help launch a nascent ecotourism operation. The company, Wild Luxury, is building high-end lodges in five locations around Colombia that will offer jungle hikes, bird-watching, horseback rides, natural springs for swimming, and, of course, fishing. Our trip in the Orinoco and Amazon basins is Herrera's opportunity to debut the business. "Now that we have a peaceful country, we want to open it up," he says. "But we have to do it the right way." The first lodge, which will open later this summer, is on a farm called El Recreo, which borders El Gavilan and has access to the river we've been fishing all afternoon.

The potential for sport fishing in Colombia parallels its tourism prospects as a whole. Though tourism here is seeing huge growth—up 64 percent since 2007—it's still in its infancy. In 2017, the country had only 3.2 million visitors compared to, say, Mexico, which saw 35 million. But the rapid growth is putting pressure on the Ministry of Environment to craft a master plan to deal with its parks and wild places. "We have incredible places, incredible resources. And it feels like our time has finally come," says Herrera. "But if you step back, there are just as many challenges."

That's the first thing you learn in Colombia: nothing here is ever as straightforward as it appears. As we break down rods in the dark at El Gavilan, a couple of Toyota Hiluxes roar onto the property in a cloud of dust and headlights to transfer us to El Recreo, The Recess. Though Dani tells us that El Recreo's lodges will be ready for business in two weeks, when

we visit them the next day, the thatch-roof structures are still lacking floors and plumbing and look like they could be months away from their (assuredly gorgeous) finish.

Instead, we camp on mosquito net-covered foam mattresses on the patio at the old farmstead, where we meet 34-year-old Carlos Restrepo, Wild Luxury's largest investor and owner of the 64,000-acre ranch. Restrepo, who camps alongside us, tells a rags-to-riches

story about his rise ending with him at the helm of a successful aircraft-leasing business.

Without bush planes, there would be no fishing in Colombia. That goes for tourism across the country: While the threat of kidnappings is what kept travelers off the roads even just a few years ago, now that that risk has disappeared, it's the lack of real highways and the prohibitive travel times that make it necessary to fly almost anywhere you go. So



## Diving Off the Pacific Coast | Malpelo



For divers tired of the crowded and overfished waters of the Caribbean, Colombia is like two tanks of fresh air. It does have great Caribbean diving, thanks to huge reefs off of Nicaragua, but the crown jewel of the country's diving is the uninhabited island of Malpelo, a scatter of rocky towers 300 miles west of its Pacific Coast. Malpelo is frequently compared to the Galapagos for its cold, challenging waters and huge schools of hammerhead sharks and Pacific manta rays. Getting there requires a guide with a sturdy boat. The easiest solution is to opt for Bogotá-based Cruz del Mar, which operates trips to the Caribbean, as well as annual expeditions to Malpelo.

FROM TOP: EL CANTIL; FLORENCE DIGITAL; BILDAGENTUR GMBH/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



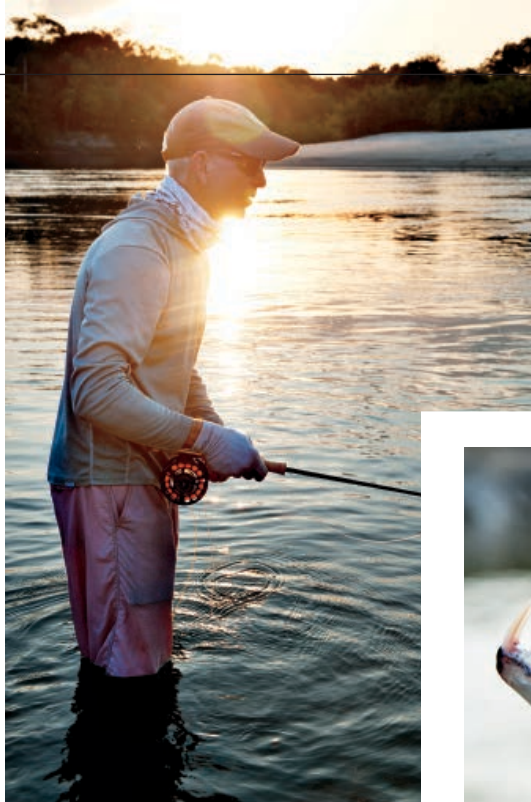
after two days on the Elvita, we hop aboard a Piper Arrow for a three-hour flight to La Macarena to fish the Río Guayabero.

Though its proximity to two national parks is turning it into a budding ecotourism destination, La Macarena was the seat of power for the FARC guerrillas during the war. The town is back in government hands, but AK-toting soldiers still patrol the street corners and infantry boats cruise the Río Guayabero. The peace here, and throughout the country, is concrete but tenuous. Even as the FARC rebels have assimilated into the political system, many Colombians can't forget the atrocities committed during the war.

We motor an hour upriver in 40-foot-long canoes to a basic lodge called El Raudal, where Wild Luxury plans to build a series of modern cabins. In the river below, guests will cast for payara, or Vampire Fish, which Dani says have bones like plates of armor, saber tooth-style fangs, and a strike more brutal than lightning.

El Raudal, the Rapids, sits at the mouth of a basalt canyon marking the start of Cordillera de los Picachos National Park. The lodge manager, José Rubio, says that the Ministry of Environment recently changed the rules that once allowed fishing up the canyon. The move was aimed at curbing illegal commercial trawling, but it also technically banned sport fishing, too. Herrera and a local ecotourism group are appealing the law in hopes of gaining an exception for catch-and-release fishing, but the situation is fluid. "It's like the Wild West," Lenz says. "There's everything available here and everyone is rushing to claim a stake, and that leads to both great things and to new problems. But we have to start somewhere."

With our expectations muted by the new restrictions, we clamber down to the river, where the first half-hour of casting seems to bear out the overfishing. At first, we catch nothing. But then, just as discouragement is



TKname person on the prowl for vampire fish, below, so-named because, well... just look.



setting in, a patch of the river surface the size of a VW begins to seethe and boil across the channel. Fist-size bait fish explode from the water like popcorn, followed occasionally by the silvery flash of a vampire fish, teeth blazing. If you're quick enough to toss your fly into the roiling mess, more often than not one of those vampires will devour it. But the energy is manic during these boils. It's impossible to throw out your line and strip it back quickly enough, over and over again until something hits. One hooked, the fish rise and leap and pirouette on top of the water as if electrified.

Rebekka is the first to snag one, and she motors off in the boat to give the fish more room to run. Hers will be the biggest the group lands, a TK-pound zombie fish with

fangs the size of bananas. Then one hits Bruce's line, and he cries out like he's been tasered. The fight is outrageous, like 30 minutes of flying a kite in a hurricane. "Oh, my shoulder!" Bruce bellyaches after we turn the fish loose. "That's like standing in a dark room waiting for a Doberman to rip your arm off."

Still, he smooths his fly, strips out line, and casts for another. In Colombia, where rebels are coming out of the jungled shadows for the first time in a generation, politics are as stable as they've been in decades, and the tourism industry is finally gaining traction, you have to fish while the fishing is good. ■

## Birding | Santa Marta



Colombia has more species of winged animals than any other country—the official count is 1,921 and rising. It's also investing heavily in bird-watching, with a huge campaign this year to get travelers into its wilds in search of rare endemics like the Santa Marta Parakeet and the blaze red Vermilion Cardinal, which makes its North American cousin look dreary. The country even boasts the new Northern Colombia Birding Trail, a series of eco-lodges and national parks that covers 50,000 acres of tropical forests in the mountains along the Caribbean coast. Six domestic and five international tour operators are licensed to guide on the trail, including Colombia Birdwatch, which offers a 10-day trip with some of the foremost ornithologists in the country.

