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Sun, sea, silence: Colombia's car-free coastal villages

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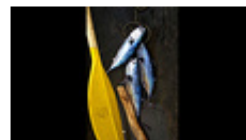
Though miles from any road — and surrounded by jungle — a village founded by fugitive slaves is opening up to tourism

In Coquí, a local's hand-carved canoe serves as a banana hauler and transport for the occasional tourist who signs up for mangrove tours through the Chocó Community Tourism Association's website

©Gregg Bleakney



Vast swathes of Colombia's Pacific coast are unreachable by roads and many of its villages have never seen a car. Locals could possibly roar along the beaches on ATVs or motorcycles, but they don't. They walk. They walk at a languid pace, barefoot, the sound of the sea lapping in the distance. When it rains, life simply stops in the villages and everyone sits in their doorways, still, listening to the jungle downpour pelt the tin roofs as they watch puddles form on the footpaths.

In the 1670s, Spaniards began arriving here, in what is now the Colombian department of Chocó, to plunder the region's gold reserves. They became fabulously wealthy but the campaign was no picnic. In 1688, one Spanish explorer, Antonio de Veroiz, wrote of Chocó, which is roughly a third the size of England: "It is all an abyss and horror of mountains, rivers and swamps."

For the conquistadors, the tangled jungle also served as a jail to the thousands of black slaves they had brought to harvest the ore — these Africans would never escape. Or so the Spaniards thought. In 1828, two daring young slaves — Rafael Moreno and his wife, Vernabel Panezo — slipped away from a gold mine in southern Chocó into the green hills and followed the Atrato river north to the sea. Their fugitive settlement soon became a village, Coquí, and they dangled hooks from hand-carved wooden canoes, harvested wild fruit and foraged for a local oyster, the piangua. Today, their descendants still live the same way — simply, and with muscular grace, in the salt air 40 miles away from the nearest paved road in Chocó's capital, Quibdó — and they are at last realising that, in a harried world, their quiet existence is a marvel and also a tourist attraction.

In Coquí and four nearby villages — Jоví, Guachalito, Playa Blanca and Termales — visitors can now immerse themselves in the daily lives of the villagers, joining them as they search for snails clinging to rocks and paddle canoes amid the mangroves, looking for rare birds such as the Chocó toucan.

It's surprisingly easy to get here. Flights from Colombia's second city, lush, decadent Medellín, take half an hour to reach the airstrip at Nuquí, a town of 2,700 people in the middle of Chocó's long north-south coastline. In Nuquí, it's just a short walk to the dock, where open-air motorboats arrive on a regular schedule to carry passengers to the villages, 20 to 40 minutes away. Adventurous travellers can bunk down in locals' spare bedrooms, for about 25,000 pesos ($10) a night, or there are several hotels and eco-lodges within earshot of the crashing waves. I stayed two nights at the Posada Palo de Agua in Coquí — basic but charming, with candles illuminating the vast porch where, at night, I enjoyed fresh fish, rice, fried plantains and cold beer. Another night I stayed at Hotel Nautilos, in Guachalito, in a tranquil room by the flower gardens. The area's most deluxe option, La Jovisena, was a short walk away, offering immaculate thatched cabanas, a fully stocked bar and guided tours to hot springs, as well as hikes in nearby Utria National Park.

Tourism in the area has been given a boost over the past three years after the US Agency for International Development trained local tour guides and hoteliers who belong to Chocó Community Tourism Alliance. Still, Nuquí and its surrounding villages remain almost unheard of. Only about 500 non-Colombians visited the area last year and nearly all of them were there to see the migrating

humpback whales that abound off shore between late June and early October. When I visited Coquí (population about 150) with photographer Gregg Bleakney, there were no other tourists.

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We encountered the village in an unrehearsed state and found small sparks of magic in everyday life. One morning on the dusty main walk, beside a sun-bleached wooden shack, we found a young man, shirtless and rippling with muscles, shaping a sharp-pointed canoe paddle by taking a knife to the bough of a tree. The yellow carved sections gleamed from the brown bark.

At Coquí's single school, a dozen children brought their desks outside and gathered them beneath a broad-leafed mango tree overlooking the beach. The girls wore a uniform of pale-green pinafores, the boys pale-green slacks. Their teacher, Fausto Hurtado, stood a few feet away, down on the beach, scratching maths problems into the sand with a stick for another gaggle of students.

Eventually, we retired to the village's only café, Sanzon Coquí, for a cold drink and watched as our host reached up from the patio to pluck fruit from a tree. The guanabanas that Cruz Melida gathered were small and green, grenade-shaped and spiky like the hide of an armadillo.

Melida is a stout middle-aged woman and, as she carved off the husks of the guanabanas (pronounced gwa-NA-ba-NA) to create a sweet juice flecked with white pulp, her manner was warm and convivial. On subsequent visits to the café, I found her singing to herself as she fried plantains. Now she took time out of her routine to mess with the *gringos*. "Now, honey," she said to me, "tell me the name of this fruit, will you?"

"Gwa gwa gwa . . ." I said, stuttering.

"Gwa gwa guh," Gregg endeavoured.

We still had so much to learn.

The next morning we went searching for the local oyster, the piangua, which is roughly the size of a golf ball, slightly oblong and black-shelled. Piangua dwell amid the roots of Chocó's myriad mangrove trees. At high tide they're submerged but when the water recedes you can pry them out of the muck. So Coquí's premier *pianguera*, Miriam Gonzalez, agreed to stroll with us along the beach towards her favourite mangrove swamp.

We walked for more than a mile. Gonzalez, 60 and lithe, was barefoot, in culottes, with a pink scarf knotted round her head. Very shy, she scarcely spoke, opting instead simply to smile at us and point with the worn machete she carried. Finally, I asked her why we had to trudge so far. "There are no mangroves near town," she said, not really elaborating.

Later, I would learn that many mangrove trees had been chopped down for firewood and home construction — and that their absence pointed to a sad reality. The wilds of Chocó are under threat: criminal gangs as well as large companies continue to mine gold here and in the process they clear-cut the forests and use mercury to separate the gold from the soil. If cash-strapped people in villages such as Coquí become too desperate, they may be tempted to engage in their own eco-destruction.

Nuquí's residents have already stooped to fishing with dynamite. Some have also taken part, nominally, in Colombia's brisk cocaine trade. When smugglers are chased by police, they sometimes toss crates of cocaine into the sea. Anyone who retrieves one of these "miracle fish" and returns it to the smugglers can score a quick $10,000. How can a struggling fisherman, too poor for a motorboat, resist? In promoting tourism, US Aid had sought to give the area a more hopeful economy — and a reason to preserve its natural splendours.

Soon we turned off the beach, into the woods, then waded across a rib-deep river and stepped into the mangroves, where in the gooey mud we sank to our shins as we negotiated the mangroves' crazy root system. The oysters were in unpredictable places and about an inch deep in the dirt. I felt as though I was on an Easter egg hunt in quicksand.

I was unable to move around without getting mud on my arms, my shirt, my face. Several times I resorted to crawling. Gonzalez, meanwhile, skimmed over the surface, probing, picking her machete at the mud judiciously. At the end of an hour, she had 30 pianguas. I had three and, when she saw how glum I was, she just smiled, toothily, and then, laughing, tossed one of her oysters at my feet so that I could "find" it, fish-in-a-barrel style. It was a somewhat patronising gesture but I sucked it up, and when we got back to town, I visited her for a moment in her cool, dimly lit home. She wanted to give me the recipe for a spiced piangua dish and so, carefully, taking pains with her cursive, she wrote the whole thing out — the garlic, the oregano, the cilantro — and then folded the paper in half and handed it to me, smiling in silence as I said goodbye.

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On the last day, it rained. And now, having been in the area for a while, I saw the hiatus that ensued as almost athletic. Here was a momentary pause in a very physical life. Here was a time to conserve energy, to catch one's breath as a boxer might between rounds, or a cyclist descending a

hill. The ardours of living by the sea would resume soon enough, and indeed as one Coquí native, 50-year-old Benedito Garcia, watched the rain, he also watched the skin of the ocean, looking for splashes. At a certain point in a storm, sardines leap to the surface, making it a good time to go after the larger fish who prey on them. Garcia waited and, when the time finally came, he grabbed his canoe, handmade from a tree he had felled himself, and paddled out.

I wish I could say I was right there with him but, that morning I was over at the schoolhouse, oblivious, checking my email. When I finally saw Garcia, he was about a mile away — standing up, a silhouette nimbly jagging about as he chased after fish.

What would I gain by being there with him in that boat? I didn't know but I had come to Coquí craving the sweet union with nature that this man now embodied. There was a purpose to my trip. And so I jumped into the water and began swimming the crawl out towards the boat. It wasn't that absurd a gambit (I sometimes swim laps) but soon, I would learn, a small crowd gathered on the shore, charting my progress with Bleakney's binoculars. Fausto Hurtado, the teacher, was slightly aghast. "White people have no fear," he told me later. "Anyone who lives here respects the power of nature. They wouldn't do that."

At some level, I knew that he was right — and that I would never become one with Coquí's calm rhythms. I was just visiting.

I reached the boat, though, and hoisted myself in, to find that sitting beside Garcia's feet were three shimmering silver fish. He paddled. I lay there in the bow, wet, tired, clutching my goggles and swim cap.

When at last Garcia was ready to return, we floated up to where the waves were breaking and he said, "Watch this!" Then we caught a wave, so we were surfing on it, gliding in towards the shore at incredible speed — almost flying. We hit the sand and jumped out. And then we carried the fish back to his house and cooked them, very slowly, in aluminium foil and ate them for lunch.

Details

La Jovisena in Guachalito offers three-night stays from 581,000 pesos ($235) per person, including boat transfer from Nuquí. Posada Palo de Agua, near Coquí, has double rooms from 150,000 pesos ($60) per night, including meals; for details of that and other hotels and ecolodges in the area, see visitchoco.com. Return charter flights from Medellín cost about $200, bookable via Palenque Tours, which can also arrange packages

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