



Esther and Sheila's Great Adventure

First the good parts -- unbelievably lovely, kind, gracious and wonderful people, perfect guiding, a driver with a rugged 4X4 vehicle, beautiful UNESCO archaeological sites, gorgeous scenery, picturesque accommodations and excellent and abundant included meals.

This great adventure started over a year ago when Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) changed its Colombia itinerary enough that it became a brand new trip. Hence, a good reason to return!

From various tour guides on my Colombia adventure two years ago, I learned of the exquisite and remote archaeological sites of San Agustín and Tierradentro. My favorite, a woman guide at the Gold Museum in Cartagena, described these sites in detail while we perused the displays of the many precious gold artifacts excavated from there. She made sure I understood that San Agustín contained the largest group of megalithic statuary in South America.



After surveying American, English, Canadian and Australian organized tours, as well as specialty archaeology operators and finding that, if at all, they visited only the semi-remote San Agustin and not the way-off-the-tourist-track Tierradentro, I began the search for a Colombian company to handle arrangements for a custom trip. Natura Travel de Colombia fit the bill. The representative I dealt with, Cesar Paez, answered emails quickly, completely and with the details needed.

Sheila and I have been on four group trips together as we were both enjoyed traveling with a company called Rutahsa Adventures. She is a veteran of eight trips with them and I of six. In 2006 we teamed up and arranged a private tour of the lesser visited Mayan sites in northwest Guatemala and southern Mexico. We love tromping around ancient sites and are happy to look at any old pile of rocks as long as someone will tell us stories about them.

So on January 14th we arrived at Bogota's brand new and gorgeous international airport, for nine days in southern Colombia. Afterwards we planned to join OAT's "Colombia's Colonial Jewels and the Coffee Triangle" tour for twelve days exploring Bogota, Medellin and Cartagena. (watch for email #2!)

Hotel de la Opera in Bogota is composed of two colonial buildings filled with antique furniture, historical paintings, flowers and Spanish-style grillwork. It also has a tower with deco-style rooms on the 7th floor. I love these tower rooms as they are bright, quiet and have either mountain or city views. The stars aligned right for us and we each were assigned a mini-suite!

Our first day is filled with errands - meeting with agent Cesar Paez and guide Jonathan to review the itinerary, stopping at the Gold Museum gift shop for books, buying a local sim card, finding watch batteries, locating certain vitamins (forgotten at home), and looking for impossible-to-find non-scented soap!

There is even time to visit a small archaeological museum that specializes in pottery (me) and the Costume Museum (Sheila). Then lunch at La Puerta Falsa (famous for its Ajiaco Santafereno soup, almost a chowder) and of course, a visit with Doris Ortiz, my favorite emerald dealer is de rigueur!

After a short flight to Neiva the next day, and landing in 100+ degree heat, we met up with guide Jonathan and immediately set off for a local restaurant for one of the best fish dishes I've ever had.

Guide Jonathan at our lunch in Neiva. We soon learn that there are no small portions in Colombia. What Jonathan has in front of him is a “regular lunch.” Sheila’s and my fish was just as huge! The mid-day meal in Colombia is the main meal of the day and restaurants serve an “executive lunch” that includes everything from drinks to dessert.



Now we get to the not-so-great parts of the trip. Southern Colombia has mountains -- high ones. Roads are sometime paved. Sometimes... not. There are rocks, there are landslides, there are mountains to go over, around, up and down. For the next week, we live at between 4000 and 6500 feet and have seven days of mountain driving. As we bump and lurch along I keep reminding myself that this is part of the adventure.



Back patio at Finca Palo Alto

Our accommodations are always picturesque and sometimes the best available. For San Agustin we stay at Finca Palo Alto. We spread out in a three bedroom house as there are no other guests. Rooms are two steps up from basic, comfortable but a bit quirky. My room has a double bed and bunk beds. Sheila has two double beds; and Jonathan has a double bed with two sets of bunk beds. Hot water lasts about two minutes so we plan our showers and are quick about it when the time comes.

In addition there is a full kitchen for our use, dining area and a lovely sitting area. A wide patio surrounds the building with comfortable lounge chairs, hammocks and potted tropical plants (loved the hanging orchids). The large garden is filled with fruit trees and each mornings breakfast includes orange juice from fruit plucked an hour earlier.

We arranged for two full days at the 250 square mile San Agustin Archaeological Park, knowing it isn't enough, but it is all the time we can spare. Natura Travel arranged a specialist guide for each site we visit and we are lucky enough to have Carlos Bolanos for the two days at San Agustin. He has guided in this archaeological zone for over 25 years. I think he appreciates our keen interest in archaeology and goes into great detail to point out the distinctive and individual features and decorative elements of the most important megaliths and statues. Where details have worn away or are difficult to distinguish, he sketches us examples. At the end of the two days, he gifts us with all the sketches!

Carlos is a true teacher. When we didn't understand something, or failed to distinguish the detail, he sketched it out for us.



San Agustin's treasures are much more than just pre-Colombian. They are pre-Christian era. Little is known about the culture, but it seems to have flourished from 3500BC to perhaps 500 AD. Like the Maya, their work is divided into pre-classic, classic and post-classic periods. No written language has been found, but there are some petroglyphs scattered about, as well as symbolism in the megalithic stones which archaeologists have yet to decipher. The first mention of the statues is in the journals of a 17th century Spanish priest who happened upon them.



The faces in the statuary are distinctive. When I look at them I feel like I'm looking at polaroids from the past. Once you see them, you would recognize them anywhere. Though there are hundreds of statues in the archaeological area, many more are in museums around the world -- especially in Berlin.

All the statues were found in underground burial chambers, nestled next to or under dolman-type structures. In some of the post-classic tombs, sarcophagi are found, but that is the exception. The structures were covered with earth so they looked like mounds from above.



There was some difficult walking/climbing on gravel or cobblestone paths, and one set of particularly steep stairs. The sites we visit over the two days include:

- Mesitas A,B,C - these are tops of hills, leveled off then tombs were dug
- Lavapatas - where a river had been redirected to flow over carved stones
- Alto de Las Piedras
- Alto de Los Idolos
- The town of Obano with its small but interesting museum
- and a picturesque 2000 foot waterfall that happened to be along the way

It took two full days to see these major sites and had we the time, we could have visited even more.

Just before leaving San Agustin we visit their Sunday market -- the largest of the week.

Fabulous! Farmers arrive on horse carts, locals bargain for large sacks of rice, beans, mounds of vegetables, whole stalks of bananas and baskets of fruits. There are products such as home-made cheeses, panela (boiled raw sugar formed into 2-pound blocks), herbal medicines (leaves, twigs and amulets) and lots of plastic ware. This is definitely a local market and we notice few foreigners and no tourist nick-nacks.



Sheila and I bought “bolsos” - these are hand-made wool unisex bags worn by people of all ages throughout Colombia. This lovely lady had just a few in her store next to the market. She was just finishing up the one she is holding.

We rock-and-roll the rest of the day on winding, dusty, paved/unpaved, twisting, stony, uncomfortable country roads, sometimes hitting bumps so hard our heads almost hit the car’s ceiling. Throughout the day, we climb higher and higher, the villages getting smaller and smaller.

Late afternoon we reach the teeny village of San Andres de Pisimbala - population 250 people, and about a million chickens. This is the jumping off point to visit the extraordinary site of Tierradentro (trans. "inside the earth.") These are hypogea, or underground tombs, that even the Spanish conquerers found inaccessible.

There are tensions and political difficulties between the indigenous Nasa group (along with several minor groups) and the government. This tribal area operates with its own customs as well as laws. There is no police or army presence here, as seen in other parts of Colombia. The local church was burnt down about a year ago as a "message." For whom or what is a local matter and no ones talking It is safe for visitors as long as there is no involvement with local issues.

Our accommodation, La Portada, is owned and operated by the affable Leonardo Velasco and his wife. The Footprint Guide to Colombia lists it as having the best food in town and it is right on. The open air restaurant has comfortable seating and lovely arrangements of protea, heliconia and gourds spread around.



Across the street is his hospedaje -- or simple accommodations. He is very proud of them, but they are basic. Leonardo is the best guide in town and if you want him, you must buy the whole package -- meals, accommodation, Leonardo and horses, if you want them.

Thank goodness for substantial Colombian breakfasts of fruit, fresh juice (here a choice of blackberry, passion-fruit, mango or orange), looney-toon yellow eggs (delicious!), arepas (corn cakes filled with cheese) and coffee. We need as much energy as we can muster for the hike that is to come.

Even though our driver Wilson takes us to a starting point at the top of the highest hill, we have 5 hours of trekking up and down from site to site. No organized paths here -- just rain-worn and rutted trails filled with scree, mud and sometimes small boulders. It is sometimes so rough walking that I have to hold on to either Leonardo or Jonathan at various points. Both Sheila and I later agree that walking down was much better than the long hard up that most tourists choose as they start their journey at the ticket office at the bottom of the last hill.



Its a long way down some of the tombs . This one has particularly nice steps. Not all were as easy as this!

Our first site is called El Tablon, a group of 9 statues with details much different than those at San Agustin; then we continue on foot to Alto de Duende (5 tombs), Alto de Segovia (25 tombs) and Loma de San Andres (7 tombs). The main event at Tierradentro are these exceptional underground vaults built from 900 to 600 BC and visitors can descend into most of them. We don't enter each and every one, but only the more decorated or those more elaborately carved. Much like visiting Europe, you don't need to visit EVERY church you pass!



Just so you know, it is not easy to descend into these tombs -- with their uneven, often narrow steps, and sometimes convex walls curving outward allowing very little room to place our feet. Some require a bit of a jump from one platform to the other. One I couldn't even visit as even Sheila, with her long legs had difficulty. And at a few too treacherous for us girls, wonderful Jonathan descends and takes photos for us - bless his little heart.

Leonardo, who was born in this area, knows every nook and cranny of these deep oval-shaped chambers. He explains the similarities and differences, points out details in the elaborate geometric designs (they used red, black and yellow colors) and stretched our minds helping us to understand the funerary customs of this ancient culture.

The day ends with a visit to the local museum exhibiting funerary urns (often found with cremated remains inside) and artifacts buried with the deceased.

Our photos of the tomb interiors are dark as no flash is allowed. The geometric details are stunning. This is a sketch of the kind of work we saw.



We are scheduled to visit Alto de Aguacate (42 small tombs) and a pyramid after our late lunch, but our bodies refuse. So Jonathan and Wilson went for us and return with great photos and stories about the steep climbs.

We move from La Portada to the Albergue El Refugio, a hotel located close to the museum and considered the best accommodation in town. The rooms are better than at La Portada but the piece de resistance is a pool!



Rats -- we had been told there would be no need for swim suits during our meeting in Bogota!!

Luckily the manager says it is OK to swim in bermuda shorts and t-shirts! We may not have been the most well-attired bathing beauties in that pool, but being the only ones, it didn't matter. Later the manager makes coca tea (for Sheila) and mint tea (for me) with leaves plucked from plants just outside the main entrance.



Colombia has taken great care to preserve and protect its magnificent archaeological sites. There are more to explore and it would be a pleasure to return someday.



It is hard to say goodbye to the little town of San Andres de Pisimbala, but at 6:30 the next morning we are on our way. Our goal being the village of Silvia for its market day. The Guambiano ethnic group dominates the area and come from their mountain villages to buy, sell and trade. It is a huge market and after a brief orientation tour, we have 1 1/2 hours to wander and explore on our own.



A few hours from Silvia our party is over. Wilson leaves the three of us at Hotel La Plazuela in Popayan and drives the entire route back to his home in San Agustin. With good reason, he wants to be off the mountain roads by nightfall.

Sheila and I check into the Spanish-colonial style hotel with its pleasant rooms set about two courtyards, then Jonathan takes us for a late lunch where we have the most beautiful grilled trout in the universe. A quick orientation tour (in the rain) and Jonathan starts his journey back to Bogota.

Jonathan was a dream to travel with. He is encyclopedic on cultural issues and willing to talk and share information on just about any topic. Throughout our time together he makes sure we are well fed both in body and in spirit. Only 25 years old, he is wise beyond his years. He delivered the itinerary designed by Natura Travel de Colombia with professionalism, sensitivity to our interests, needs and physical abilities, all the while treating us in a kind, friendly manner.

We knew we would miss him.

So what to do during our two full days in Popayan? Sheila and I quickly agree to “take a vacation from our vacation” on the first day. Both exhausted, we have no need to make firm plans or be on a schedule.

I hang out in the hotel restaurant, which has a great view of the street, and work on this commentary; and Sheila scouts out the town at her leisure. Tomorrow we plan to visit the museum and handicrafts center. And the next day (Friday), we fly back to Bogota where we’ve arranged for a “Graffiti Tour” of the Candelaria area. That evening we join fellow OAT travelers for our group tour.

It has been a fabulous visit to the major archaeological sites of southern Colombia. We leave knowing we’ve experienced a very special place and had the pleasure of meeting and traveling with very special people. It couldn’t have been any better.



Photo by Jonathan

Addenda

Recommendations if you are interested in doing this trip:

1. Have a Colombian company make the entire arrangements, from your transfer from the international airport, one night hotel in Bogota, flights to and from southern Colombia, guiding, car/driver, admissions to archaeological sites and museums and meals. Our quote included breakfasts and lunches. The noon meal is the main meal of the day in Colombia, so all you need is a snack for dinner.
2. When you change money, try to get the smallest bills possible. The 1000COP (about \$.50) and 2000 (COP) (approx. \$1.00) are particularly useful for buying bottled water, small snacks and minor tipping.
3. Take your vitamins -- visiting these sites involve a lot of walking over uneven paths, climbing stone stairs and inching your way Indiana-Jones-style into underground chambers, some as deep as 30 feet requires good agility, flexibility and endurance.
4. Good, sturdy footwear is essential, especially for Tierradentro. Also clothing that allows you to stretch as you descend on uneven steps, sometimes quasi-jumping from one to another (especially if you are short!)

Contacts:

OK -- I'm going to add contact information -- but don't even think of coming to this part of Colombia on your own. An English-speaking guide/escort/translator and a car/driver are essential. Our specialist guides in San Agustín and Tierradentro spoke only

Spanish so your guide/escort serves as translator.



Public transportation in this area is in older vans and open air "ranchero" busses stuffed to the gills with packages, burlap bags full of who-knows-what and small livestock.

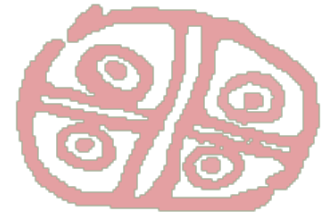
Want to do this trip on your own?
You are sure to have an exciting time
on the local vans.

- Company that did our arrangements:

Natura Travel de Colombia

www.naturatraveldecolombia.com

Cesar Paez is the agent I dealt with. The main office for Natura Travel is in Caracas, Venezuela where it has been in business for over 30 years. The owner established the Bogota branch three years ago.



- Main guide and escort: Jonathan Aristazabel Ortiz
- Driver: Wilson Fernando Nara Chilito and his heavy duty Chevy 4WD D-Max vehicle
- Guide in San Agustin: Carlos Ildelfonso Bolanos carlosbolanosguia@hotmail.com
- Guide and Hotelier in San Andres de Pisimbala (for Tierradentro) Leonardo Velasco laportadatierradentro@hotmail.com

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Photo at at beginning: Esther and Sheila on a “chiva” or “ranchero” bus. These are rugged trucks fitted with wooden seats that provide public transportation in the mountains.



We enjoy a snack stop for “obleas” in a small mountain town. This sweet treat is one of the most popular street foods in the country and can be found everywhere. It consists of two dish-size wafers filled with flavored syrups, chocolate and cheese. Yum!