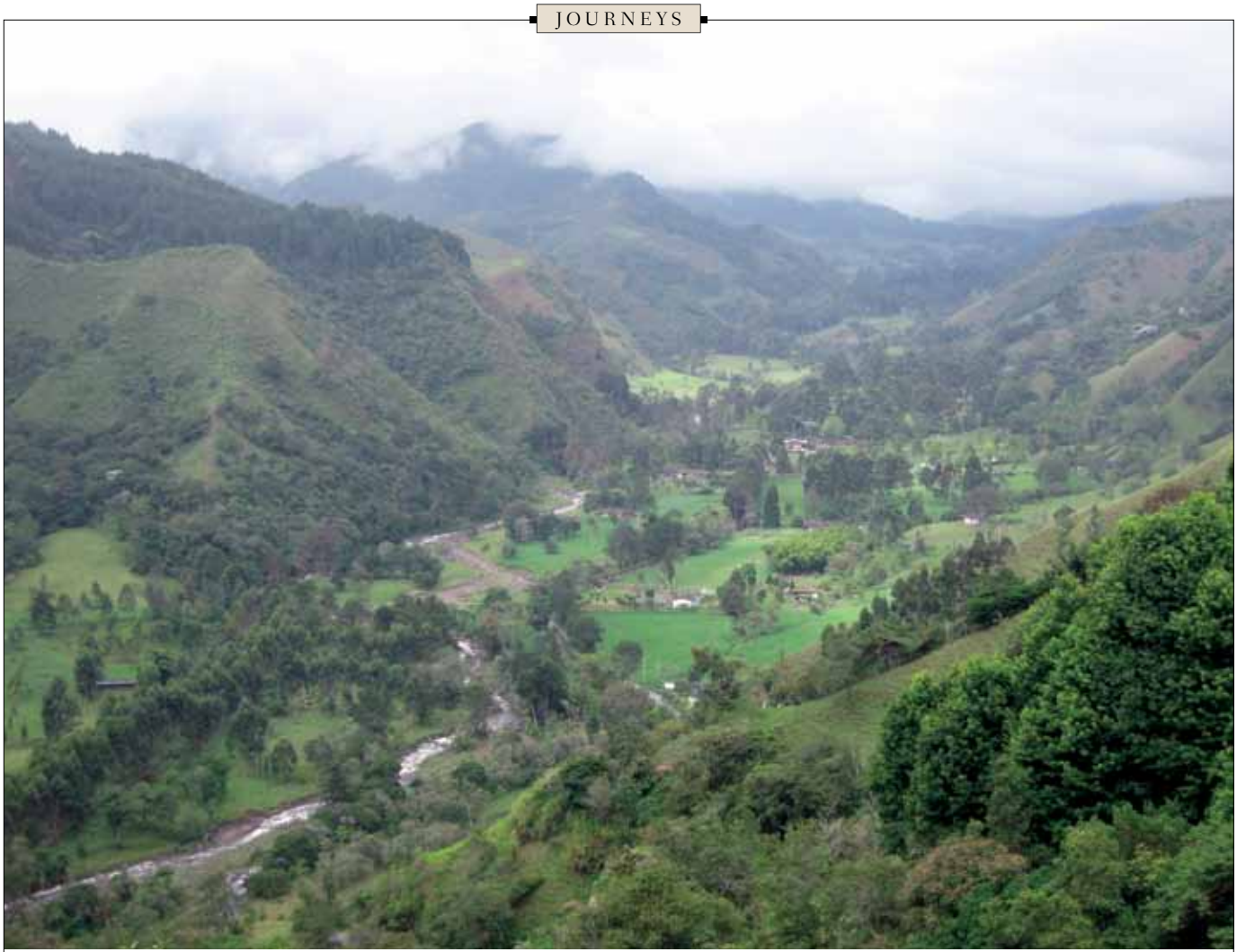

Risk and Reward

Big Five Tours takes on the notorious destination of Colombia, where the challenges are many, but the payoffs can be plentiful for curious travelers.

BY JENNIFER RYAN

When Ashish Sanghrajka, president of Florida-based Big Five Tours & Expeditions, landed in Bogotá, Colombia, in early 2008, there was no one there to pick him up at the airport. Which only served to prove his point.

Sanghrajka had not wanted to visit Colombia in the first place. And with each passing minute outside the baggage terminal, his negative impression of the country degraded into disdain. Sanghrajka had authorized Big Five's soft launch in Colombia 18 months earlier, and recent client feedback had been riddled with complaints. He had flown to Bogotá that day to shut down the operation.

But Sanghrajka did not shut it down. In fact, he fell head over heels for Colombia and is now committed to promoting tourism in the country that he describes as "the sleeping giant of South America." And while Sanghrajka and his company have overcome several hurdles since his first visit, more lie ahead—as I experienced firsthand while traveling to Colombia with Big Five Tours for nine days last summer.

My journey started in Pereira, a coffee-region capital of some 500,000 residents, where

The lush Valle del Cocora, in the heart of Colombia's coffee region, is rarely visited by North Americans.

JENNIFER RYAN

I was picked up at my hotel by a driver and a chipper 22-year-old tour guide, Sandra. We raced out of town, with Sandra giggling as the compact SUV weaved daringly between delivery vans and pickup trucks. She turned around from the front seat to ask me if the driving style in her country is different from that in California.

"Yes, very different," I said.

Sandra nodded knowingly, and told me she worked for a year in Kentucky as an au pair.

"The first time I took my bicycle out on my own, I ended up on the freeway," she said. "I had never seen a freeway before, so how could I know they don't allow bicycles?"

Fortunately a bike ride was not on our itinerary for the day; instead, Sandra asked if I would like to spend the day hiking or horseback riding. I told her I would prefer to hike.

"But you will see so much more if we take the horses," she said. "You can go much farther into the valley."

I submitted and soon found myself sitting atop a slow horse wandering through the Valle del Cocora in Los Nevados National Natural Park. My steed walked down a dirt road behind Sandra's horse, which followed several more horses carrying tourists from other groups.

"These are the tallest type of palm tree in the world," Sandra said, pointing out the dozens of wax palms towering over our heads. "And these are Colombia's national tree."

The wax palms, as tall as 200 feet, were everywhere, permeating plots of bright green farmland that stretched out on either side of the road to forested mountains blanketed by the morning mist. A beautiful place for a hike, I thought.

Following the hour-long horseback ride, I stopped for lunch at the plantation where we had rented the horses. The large restaurant was crowded with Colombian families enjoying a Sunday-afternoon meal. I ordered the chicken instead of the fish, and it arrived with french fries and a dry corn patty.

Most parts of the country, especially those away from the jungles, are safe and always have been.

Later that afternoon, on the way back to the hotel, my driver spotted a coffee plant sticking out through a fence. He pulled over on the highway, and Sandra and I hopped out of the SUV. She picked a cherry off the plant, showing me how to peel back the layers and find the bean.

"Most people don't know that coffee comes from a cherry," she said. "Did you know that?"

"No," I replied.

"Did you know that Colombians view the Americans as weak?"

"No."

"It is because they take hot showers," she told me proudly. "Here, to take a cold shower is normal. Your friends will tease you if you take a hot shower."

I did not know that.

"I took hot showers in Kentucky," she admitted. "And I loved it."

"THE BEAUTY OF Colombia," says Big Five's Sanghrajka, "is that the innocence is still there."

Indeed, much of the country's appeal as a tourism destination derives from the fact that it has never been a popular tourism destination. Many North Americans enjoy Colombia's famous exports—coffee, pop music by Shakira, art by Fernando Botero, novels by Gabriel García Márquez—but the

country's ongoing guerrilla violence and inextricable association with cocaine trafficking have kept it off the itineraries of most Americans.

Colombia's various guerrilla factions hold claim to being the longest-running insurgency in the Western Hemisphere. The guerrillas have been active in Colombia's countryside since the years of civil war in the 1950s, and millions of the nation's citizens have been driven from their homes by what is known simply as *La Violencia*. For decades, refugees from the strife have poured into the capital city of Bogotá. The Colombian government counts 1.7 million since 1995; the United Nations counts between 2 and 3 million since 1986. Only Sudan has more war refugees than Colombia.

The guerrillas and drug traffickers—who are often one and the same—continue to wreak havoc in many regions of Colombia today. But most parts of the country, especially those away from the jungles, are safe and always have been. From 2002 through 2010, during the tenure of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, the number of crimes, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks across the country decreased significantly.

For Sanghrajka, there are other reasons to be optimistic about Colombia. He believes the country's colonial cities, coffee plantations, tropical islands, and forested parks add up to enormous potential as a destination for North American travelers—especially at the high-end. What contributes most to his enthusiasm, however, are the Colombians themselves.

FOLLOWING THE INITIAL hiccup, Sanghrajka's first trip to Colombia took an immediate turn for the better. After waiting for 20 minutes outside the baggage terminal, Sanghrajka spotted a compact SUV with a Big Five sign pulling up to the curb.

"What happened?" he demanded of his driver, Olga, who knew the boss had not come for a friendly visit.

"I've violated my own teaching," she replied. "I teach hospitality at the university, and what do I tell my students? I tell them, 'Be early!' "

In the car Olga launched into a long

LORENA TORO

Inside the walls of Cartagena's charming old city (opposite page) are brightly colored colonial buildings that house locally owned restaurants and shops. Many of Cartagena's boutique hotels, including Anandá and La Passion (above), have rooftop pool areas with Caribbean Sea views.

"What we're doing in the Rosario Islands you couldn't do two years ago."

—ASHISH SANGHRAJKA, PRESIDENT, BIG FIVE TOURS

story about the history of Bogotá. She was not reciting names and dates she had learned in tourism school; rather, she was telling Sanghrajka about the history of her own family. The story turned into a conversation, and gradually Sanghrajka began sharing his upbringing in Kenya and answering Olga's questions about his Indian heritage. Sanghrajka soon forgot all about Olga being 20 minutes late, and what could have been a painfully awkward ride from the airport turned into "one of the most enjoyable drives," he recalls. "Right then I was inspired. I could see so much potential in Colombia."

Also encouraging on his first visit to Colombia was what he did not see. "I can honestly tell you that I did not see a souvenir hawker in sight for days," Sanghrajka says.

While alluring in many respects, Colombia's lack of exposure to tourism certainly has its downsides—including a dearth of local guides accustomed to North Americans' expectations for both exclusivity and authenticity. Sanghrajka told me on the phone before my trip that in the coffee region I would see "the true Colombia." He said that when he was in the coffee region he spoke one-on-one with farmers who admitted they formerly grew cocaine. On my trip to the coffee region—which was undeniably beautiful—my exposure to farming was limited to a touristy horseback ride and a glimpse at a plant through a roadside fence.

"European tourists don't care to meet the farmers, but travelers from North America do care about these things," says Sanghrajka. "These are the details the guides are still learning. Whether or not they get everything right on the ground, I've seen that their intentions are always right."

Sanghrajka concedes that Colombia is not for everyone. Big Five, which currently operates in 40 countries, sent about 100 clients to Colombia in 2009 and doubled that number in 2010. But Sanghrajka says he would be surprised if the figure ever exceeds 500 per year.

For each of his clients interested in Colombia, Sanghrajka recommends one destination over any other: Cartagena. "While Bogotá is nice," he says, "Colombia's true heart and history is in Cartagena."

It is also where Big Five has made the most progress.

DAY FOUR OF my Big Five itinerary read, "This morning, you will be taken on a different kind of exploration of Cartagena."

I had spent the previous day hitting the "must-sees," which included the monastery and church of La Popa (built in 1606; amazing views) and the fortress of San Felipe de Barajas (built in 1657; largest Spanish fort in South America). But for my second day in Cartagena, my local guide, Nico, had arranged something that few tourists ever experience.

I was staying in Cartagena at the 23-room Anandá, a 2-year-old hotel that is one of several former private haciendas within the historic walled city that have been converted into boutique accommodations. Eclectic and charming, if not overtly luxurious, these hotels are generally hidden behind tall wooden doors with heavy metal knockers and small cutout windows, which a bellman will peek through after you knock—as Nico did early that morning.

With Nico was Jorge Escandon, owner of a popular local restaurant, La Cevicheria, that has appeared on Anthony Bourdain's Travel Channel

Big Five counts its private cruise to the Rosario Islands (left) and chef-led tour of Basurto market (right) among its top offerings in Cartagena.

LEFT: JENNIFER RYAN; RIGHT: LORENA TORO

show *No Reservations.* Nico announced that the three of us would be heading to the food market of Basurto, followed by a visit to Escandon's beach house for a cooking lesson.

The market, set outside the walls of the old city, was a sprawling milieu of shouting voices and shade umbrellas. As we entered the first section of the market, Escandon whispered to me that here he is Colombian. "Jorge, Jorge!" the shopkeepers yelled from behind their stands piled high with fresh langoustines, blue crab, and shrimp. One table in the butcher section was covered with cow eyeballs, another with only hooves. "I don't recommend that tourists go here alone," Escandon said. "People here aren't used to seeing tourists; they are not educated about tourists."

Everyone we passed was so excited to see Escandon that I faded into the crowd. "Here I am Italian," he whispered. "Italiano! Italiano!" the vendors shouted, offering up bags of *corozo* (dark cherries), *guanabana* (a prehistoric fruit with many seeds), and yucca (used like a potato and served with meat and fish). Pineapples, star fruit, oranges, bananas, and fruits I had never seen before covered table after table.

In the third section of the market, Escandon was Argentinean. When the sellers saw him approaching, they started yelling about *fútbol.* The World Cup tournament was under way, and I heard Escandon promise a vender he would come back and dance the tango if Argentina won.

During the drive to Escandon's beach house—where I learned how to prepare a paella dish with ingredients we had procured at Basurto—Nico told me about a couple ("They were like you," he said) who did not want to see any traditional tourist sites. They told him they wanted to see how people live. "First, I took them to the market," said Nico, who visits Basurto with his wife early each morning. "The next day we went to small fishing towns and cattle ranches."

As authentic an experience as he delivers in Cartagena, Nico—a preferred guide for Colombian Journeys, Big Five's local partner—slipped back into tourist mode the next day on a visit to the Corales de Rosario y San Bernardo National Natural Park.

"What we're doing in the Rosario Islands you couldn't do two years ago," Sanghrajka had told me before my trip, describing untouched islands and pristine snorkeling beaches. "We're taking you out there on a private speedboat. Before, the only way to get out there was the public ferry."

Even Colombia's national tourism slogan—"The only risk is wanting to stay"—addresses the country's stereotypes head-on. This slogan rang true for me on my final night in Bogotá.

The Archipelago del Rosario, a 460-square-mile park of around 30 coral islands and islets, is a three-hour ferry ride from Cartagena. Day-trip passengers have just enough time to visit a floating aquarium and return to Cartagena before the sea gets rough. But the islands are only about an hour away in a speedboat, by which I was scheduled to arrive at the San Pedro de Majagua Hotel, an intimate resort with a five-star PADI diving center.

I made the trip on the private speedboat—but not to San Pedro de Majagua. Nico had a friend at another, much lower-end resort, so we went there instead and ate watermelon and fried fish on a plastic picnic table. Watching children bob up and down on foam noodles in the pool, I opted not to swim. Nico finally found someone to take me snorkeling—after the tour groups had finished—but the day did not live up to Sanghrajka's pristine promises.

BEFORE HE OFFERED Colombia as a destination, Sanghrajka launched and pulled the plug on Big Five operations in Venezuela, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe. But he sees a difference with his latest emerging destination. "Regardless of what has happened in Colombia's past, the government for the most part has had a positive relationship with the United States," he explains. "This government is making a valiant effort to overcome the stereotypes. They aren't just saying things; they are making real changes on the ground."

The Colombian government is also saying things: Even its national tourism slogan—"The only risk is wanting to stay"—addresses the country's stereotypes head-on.

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I spent the last night of my trip having dinner with Sandro Leopardi, manager of Big Five partner Colombian Journeys. Leopardi, who is Italian, apologized profusely for what happened in the Rosario Islands, though he assured me it was a hiccup compared to what used to occur when he opened his office four years ago. Just a decade ago, he said, travelers were turned away at the airport because immigration patrol did not know whether U.S. citizens needed a visa or not.

As he spoke of Colombia's progress, his vision for tourism, and how he pioneered the market trips with Escandon, Leopardi convinced me that he, Sanghrajka, and others like them can unlock Colombia in a way that appeals to North American travelers.

"Just give me nine more days," Leopardi insisted, passionately describing destinations I had not visited. "I promise you will see how amazing it is." R

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