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The Coffee Trail

By JUAN FORERO

OUR guide, Daniel Giraldo, is only 12, but he knows the terrain, all the hazards and turns of this steep, four-foot-wide trail. The horse I am riding has done this before and uncannily finds the best passage along rocky corridors where the footing seems uncertain, or the safest path through the narrow but fast-moving waters of the rivers we cross.

Until recently, the only people who would have negotiated this path were stoic farmers in rubber boots, bedraggled army patrols or the occasional band of Marxist guerrillas. This is Colombia, after all, a little-understood country whose very name is synonymous with cocaine traffickers and civil conflict.

But this coffee-growing region tucked into the mountains of central Colombia has rarely known violence. Now, local businessmen and hacienda owners — who for the last decade have made the region a vibrant tourism destination for Colombia's middle class — are trying to lure visitors from abroad by touting the beauty of its rolling hills, venerable coffee farms and row after row of shimmering coffee bushes.

We have already traversed a tapered green valley, the fields on either side rising abruptly into sharp-peaked mountains. Parrots and what locals called yellow-eared sparrows fly past the odd, 200-foot wax palms that are native to these Andean mountains. In the distance we can see the *fincas*, or farms, whose owners grow coffee and potatoes and raise prize bulls that pass through the nearest town, Salento, on market day.

At 8,700 feet, we reach Acaime (pronounced ah-cah-EE-meh), an outpost for biologists and, increasingly, tourists, where we sip *agua de panela*, a hot sugar-cane based drink, and watch hummingbirds hover at feeders. Omar Guzmán, the caretaker, explains how this lovely corner — largely unknown to the outside world — is slowly being discovered.

"People want to learn, to see what we have," says Mr. Guzmán, who like others here is lean and nimble, better to negotiate steep trails.

Three days more on horseback and we would be climbing Los Nevados, at 17,440 feet one of the great peaks in the Andes, a trip increasingly on the menu for eco-tourists.

Of course, the problem with Colombia as a tourist destination is that civil conflict has made kidnappings a real hazard. The conflict is far from over, and the risks remain in several otherwise beguiling regions, like the vast cattle plains and the rebel-infested Macarena hills, where cold mountain streams roll over a beet-red bed of submerged flowers.

But Colombia is huge, twice the size of France, and offers perhaps more cultural and geographical diversity than any other country in South America.

Its capital, Bogotá, has been transformed in recent years into a cosmopolitan city, full of museums and restaurants. The walled Caribbean city of Cartagena rivals the old quarter of Havana with its centuries-old buildings. Colombia's little-known Pacific coast is rugged and heartbreakingly beautiful, with islands that, like the better-known Galápagos to the south, are full of ecological wonders.

In many areas of the country, a three-year government offensive has pushed rebel groups back. There are now a few safe pockets beginning to attract foreigners.

Among them is the *Eje Cafetero* (the "coffee crossroads"), made up of three diminutive states — Quindío, Risaralda and Caldas — about 100 miles west of Bogotá, recognized as the source for some of the world's best coffee. In the smallest and most charming, Quindío, beat-up World War II-era Willy Jeeps carry loads of bananas and heavy sacks of coffee to market on meandering country roads. The state's 11 towns are simultaneously charming and a little worn on the edges.

Montenegro, one of the liveliest, has a bustling plaza, where musicians play lovelorn ballads as teenagers gather under shady trees and weary farmers sip coffee at the many cafes. Salento, almost everyone's favorite, is built on the razor's edge of a mountain, its houses and church glistening white in the distance and framed by towering mountains.

On a slow drive across Quindío, the spectacular panorama bursts into view at unexpected turns. Plump hillsides teem with banana trees or coffee plants, many of them decades old. Slender gullies feature the cartoonish *guaduales*, giant bursts of bamboo topped by delicate foliage.

"There are 12 tones of green, wherever you look," Maria del Rocío Baena, the owner of one farm, tells me.

For visitors from frenzied cities like Medellín or Cali, coffee country is an oasis of sorts, a journey back to a more tranquil and traditional Colombia, where most people lived on farms and coffee was king.

The central experience in coffee country is savoring that tranquillity while staying at the haciendas. They are old and creaky farmhouses, virtually all of them painted in bright, whimsical colors, their porches overflowing with orchids and ferns. Many of them are working farms that offer tours of the coffee fields and the surprisingly old-fashioned steps taken to turn a bright red bean into a valuable commodity. The 20 best make up the so-called Haciendas del Café.

The owners are usually the descendants of settlers who arrived in the 1800's to found small, tight-knit communities and embark on the production of what would become Colombia's economic engine for decades.

Coffee farmers formed cooperatives and commercialized their coffee. The National Federation of Coffee Growers, the organization that markets Colombian coffee, paved roads, built schools, founded a bank and owned an airline. All of this was easy half a century ago, when coffee went for \$5 a pound at today's prices and accounted for 80 percent of the country's exports.

The good times, however, did not last and by this decade, coffee prices had tumbled to less than 50 cents a pound, half of coffee's value from the late 1990's (the price of coffee is now back up to \$1.30 a pound). Farmers here turned to bananas, macadamia nuts and berries. And they also turned to tourism, realizing that their haciendas could easily double as bed-and-breakfast inns.

One of the haciendas, El Balso, a century-old two-story farmhouse with five guest rooms on 27 acres outside of Armenia, Quindío's capital, is painted red and white, with blue trim. The big veranda is filled with old leather chairs, a hammock and tables. The rooms are outfitted with antique brass beds and mahogany dressers. There is no glass in the windows, just wooden shutters that, when open, overlook a luxuriant garden of mango and guayaba trees.

El Balso's other key attraction is that it continues to churn out coffee for export. "This is my life," Mr. Morales de la Pava, 69, explains as he leads me out into the field shortly after I arrive. "It's what my father did, what my grandfather did."

Walking to one of his coffee trees, Mr. Morales holds a branch in his beefy hand. The green beans, he says, are still not ready to pick. He and his workers instead look for the red, ripe ones. They need to be constantly on the lookout for the broca, a tiny bug that burrows into the seed and eats out the center, and the arroya, a fungus that can infect the bean.

When the harvest takes place — there are two a year, each taking between four and eight weeks — he brings in another 20 workers, who go about the painstaking process of picking each bean by hand. That, Mr. Morales says, is one of the secrets to the quality of Colombia's arabica beans, that they are carefully chosen, with those that are not ready left to ripen, and those that are infected, left to rot.

Once picked, the beans are unloaded in a storage room and into a chute, where they drop into the vast, concrete cellar below the hacienda, where the shell and pulp are removed in old heavy grinders. Then it is time to dry them, and Mr. Morales de la Pava uses two methods, the old-fashioned and modern. Some beans are simply laid outside in the hot sun, workers stirring them to make sure they are completely dry. Others are placed in a giant oven for 35 hours, where they are left toasted and light as pebbles.

But visitors should not expect coffee tastings or even very good coffee, for that matter. The paradox about Colombia is that while it is known worldwide for the quality of its coffee beans, outside of a few choice restaurants in big cities, Colombians have yet to master the art of making a good cup of coffee.