

LOST PARADISE

Canadian Jeffrey Kofman is the Miami correspondent for ABC News, covering the Caribbean and Latin America as well as Florida. Kofman comes from Toronto and worked as a correspondent for CBC News, moving to CBS News in New York and joining ABC in 2001. He has reported extensively from the region.

After travelling to more than 50 countries, I have found paradise. It is a guest house on a lush coffee plantation in South America called Finca Guayabal. Perched at the end of a long, curving driveway lined with hibiscus, the *finca*, or farm, is a tropical Eden. In every direction coffee trees line the steep mountain slopes. At sunrise, a thick mist hangs in the air. The deep valleys burst with topical trees, sporting blooms in oranges and pinks and reds. Birds of blue and yellow and green chirp and screech as they fly about.

All this for \$20 a night, meals included.

But before you rush to book your getaway from a frigid Canadian winter, consider that the *finca* is in one of the most dangerous regions in the world: the Andean highlands of Colombia, near the provincial city of Manizales, a short flight from Bogota.

"No," says the elegant proprietor, Doña Maria Teresa Londoño, in polite but firm Spanish, "there are no guerrillas in this area. When we have guests I have a guard and dogs patrolling the grounds, but we have never had a problem."

The same cannot be said of the surrounding region. I was in the area shooting a story on the collapse of world coffee prices. Just days after I left, guerrillas belonging to Colombia's biggest rebel group stopped a convoy of cars a few miles north of the *finca*.

Ten men were kidnapped at gunpoint.

It is no accident that Doña Maria Teresa's noisy, Spanish-speaking pet parrot is named Paz, or Peace. That is what has long eluded this country, once home to notorious narco-traffickers and now under siege from guerrillas who have taken control of the drug trade and terrorize the population of 44 million. In the last decade, rebels have kidnapped some 3,000 people a year.

The 65-hectare *finca* has been in the Londoño family since the 1940s. Despite her advanced years and delicate shoes, Doña Maria Teresa nimbly navigates the surrounding jungle slopes, showing visitors the impressive local flora. "Look there," she points with pride to a flowering plant much taller than her five-foot frame, "a white bird of paradise. Very rare." And beautiful. An albino cousin of the orange and violet hothouse flower found in so many Canadian florist shops.

Foreign tourists are equally exotic here. Doña Maria Teresa has occasionally seen Europeans and Canadians, but most guests are Colombians. Americans? As rare as that white bird of paradise.

A few days after returning to Bogota, I had dinner with an American diplomat and told him about my enthralling journey to the *finca*. He nodded knowingly. "Colombia could have a \$5-billion-



Tropical Eden: ABC Latin America correspondent Jeffrey Kofman stands in a coffee grove on Finca Guayabal.

photo: courtesy of ABC News

a-year tourism industry," he said. "If it could ever rid itself of guerrillas and drugs, this country could be as popular as France."

It seems a perfectly reasonable—if tragically unattainable—vision for so much of this region but especially this place of extraordinary natural and historical riches.

Colombia, under the firm and controversial leadership of President Alvaro Uribe—and with more than \$4 billion in aid from the United States—is struggling to regain its security and crush rebel groups. Kidnapping and murder rates have fallen significantly, but are still treacherously high. Drug production has been curtailed, but Colombia remains the single-biggest source of cocaine on U.S. streets.

At Finca Guayabal, visitors wake to the chirping of birds and the squawk of Paz. "Quiero Cacao," he says. "I want chocolate."

And who wouldn't? The chocolate and coffee here come from the trees to the breakfast table. A visit to the *finca* makes clear that Colombia is a land of enormous possibilities. If only there could be peace.

Until then, Paz will continue to squawk for his chocolate in splendid, tarnished isolation. ♣

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