EXPERIENCING COLOMBIA

As seen through the eyes of Spyros Peter Goudas
This article was written to inform and educate those who are unfamiliar with Colombia, and to allow Colombians to experience a third party’s impression of their country, as well as to feed the curiosity of those who wonder about its characteristics. I wanted to express my thoughts on this beautiful country, sharing everything I learned about the people, the food and the culture.

The pictures included were taken personally by me, and displayed in this article to show the readers a very realistic view of Colombia.

EXPERIENCING COLOMBIA:

Where Business and Pleasure Shake Hands with Passion!

The following pages document a trip to a South American country, Colombia, where half its coast faces the Atlantic Ocean and the other half the Pacific Ocean. This country achieved independence in 1819. Its total land area is 1,142,000 sq. kilometers, and its estimated population in 2005 was 42,954,280 people. Its main language is Spanish and 96% of the population is Roman Catholic. The voyage began at Pearson International Airport (Toronto) via Miami, Florida, to Cartagena, Colombia.

Upon arrival at Cartagena, the temperature of 25-30 degrees Celsius immediately changed everyone’s mood. The smiling faces of the Colombians greeted the delegates who were an international group from as far away as China, Japan, Europe, and many other parts of the world.

Two well-known International Trade Specialists for Proexport Colombia, Mr. Rodolfo Moseres Dieppa and Mr. Rafael Vargas, prearranged the Canadian delegation. Upon arrival at the Convention Centre, there was evidence of top security due to the fact that over 2,000 high-profile business people were in attendance. As a consequence the atmosphere was stress free. The range of products exhibited was so varied, it seemed like there was everything imaginable produced under the sun in Colombia.

The head organizer of the event, Proexport President Mr. Luis Guillermo Plata, gave a speech outlining the purpose of the gathering, the tremendous opportunities, and the statistics reflecting the dramatic decrease in the crime rate, as well as the enormous decline in the unemployment rate.

Emphasis was made of the fact that “Colombians do everything with passion!” The word “passion” became a trademark throughout the whole event. As seen in the picture, the symbol of passion, a flaming heart, was displayed on the t-shirts of the attendants.

When the meeting was completed, each group joined a sightseeing tour inside the “walls of the Cartagena Castle”.

The voyage began at Pearson International Airport (Toronto) via Miami, Florida, to Cartagena, Colombia.
This gentleman in the photo is taking a snooze at the gate. We are unsure as to whether he is part of the security!

Upon entering the gate we were pleasantly surprised to see the interior. We enjoyed “typical” Colombian foods such as: cassava, yucca, fried plantains, eggplant, and baby potatoes. This was accompanied by “typical” Colombian dips. The word “typical” is used very often by Colombians to describe anything Colombian.

Close to the end of the day, from the far end of the hall, a group of people started singing in English “Happy Birthday to You”, in the presence of over 2,000 people. They were moving forward with a birthday cake in hand and encouraging the delegates to follow them, while continually singing “Happy Birthday to You”. Everyone ended up at the “Mr. Goudas” table, and to my surprise, the cake and birthday song was for me. What a pleasant surprise and a happy moment for me! I was so preoccupied that I had forgotten it was my birthday!

The following day, each purchasing group had its own desk at the convention center, to welcome the potential suppliers, as well as to view and discuss products. In some instances, translators were required and provided. In the pictures you can view some suppliers along with their products.

The closing ceremony in Cartagena was held opposite the Convention Centre with a view of the Castle and the Cathedral. The dinner itself was exquisite. There was everything one could desire:
mouth-watering appetizers, exotic fruits of all kinds (expertly carved and decorated), various fresh fruit juices, tenderly barbequed meats, and a delicious assortment of pastries and desserts.

Dinner was followed up with performances of “typical” Colombian culture. This included dancers who demonstrated different dimensions in the art of dancing. It was an enjoyable evening.

Nevertheless, enough with the entertainment, let us do some work. On the Agenda was a visit to a Tuna Factory. When the delegation arrived there we were very impressed with the hygiene, machinery, organization and the quality of the products. It was truly a state-of-the-art factory. Those who think that tuna is a small fish because it is sold in small cans, are truly mistaken. Tunas are actually very big fish, ranging from 40-200 cm. The fishing boats are very big and there are helicopters on their top level, used to locate the school of tuna.

It was quite surprising that the owner of the tuna factory, Mr. Alvaro Bustamante Steer, had absolutely no pictures, paintings, or decorations in his office. As seen in the picture, he only had a single crucifix hanging up on his wall.

The flight from Cartagena to Cali took approximately one hour, and it should be noted that there was a special smoking area at the airport, which was quite welcoming to the delegates who smoked. It was a well-ventilated, spotless environment with relaxing chairs and a cafeteria. One of the factories visited produced palm oil, margarines and other related products.

The equipment in the factory was truly impressive.
Maria Elena Collazos, chief executive of the company who worked for many years in the organization, provided us with a guided tour of the facility.

Seen below is Paola Puccini Lizarazo. She is not just another pretty face. Paola is actually the export manager of the above-mentioned factory, the largest in South America. It is a good opportunity at this point to make a comment about Cali. The arrival at this place was literally an eye-opening experience for some of the delegates. Cali is known for its distinguished eye doctors, who perform laser eye surgeries, which only last several minutes and have the highest success rate. Using the latest technological procedures, we witnessed an unbelievably fast recovery of two of our colleagues, who continued the tour a couple of prescription glasses short.

What was even more pleasant is that the whole procedure cost less than $700 US! Later on, the tour group sat for lunch at one typical Colombian restaurant, accompanied by a peacock. The food served was native, and the beautiful scenery was a welcoming diversion. The tour group also had the opportunity to view a coffee plantation, where the intense greenery was amazing.

Here is a “Juan Valdez” look-alike who happened to pass by for a photo opportunity.

Everyone was surprised to see the coffee plants and their crop. The seeds were not brown as expected; they were actually white. We were later told that they turn brown after they have dried.

That evening, dinner was prepared by an unexpected chef. The sweetest man
in Colombia, the king of sugar, Mr. Juan Pablo Cabal, dressed down to his casual self and impressed everybody with his cooking skills. His delicious risotto dish was enjoyed tremendously, especially by me (since I am the largest importer in Canada of most varieties of rice from all over the world, I am referred to as the king of rice in various circles) and I even asked for a second serving! Choosing to cook rice was a risky decision, being that this particular guest (myself) knows everything there is to know about it. Nevertheless, I was truly impressed with this new recipe, which is definitely an honourable achievement for the chef.

Dinner was served overlooking the view of the Cali mountain, featuring three giant lit crosses on its top, a trademark symbol of the city.

The next day we visited a sugar cane plantation. On the way there, the cane fields spread for miles and miles. For people who had never seen this plant, the fields looked exactly like corn fields. At this point, we decided to stop and take pictures of the sugar cane, to display how the plant looks prior to processing.

The trucks transporting the sugar cane to the mill for processing were so constantly visible, they seemed like a multi-train convoys.
The sugar cane is gathered in one area where it is crushed through the mill by humongous machines which separate the skin from the pulp. There are various stages of processing before crystallization into the actual product found on the supermarket shelf. The whole process was explained by Mabel Ferreira, the chief engineer of the factory.

It was quite refreshing to witness how many well-educated females hold supervisory and engineering positions at Colombian factories. It was also amazing to see how much work is needed to transform the sugar cane into crystallized sugar. The process is very complicated and it was an eye-opening experience for those who take sugar for granted.

In the above picture, I am explaining the powerful suction system used by my organization in Canada to convey grains from one silo to another. It is so powerful, I called it the Monika Loewinski system.

The company also produces the most delicious mocha which we all enjoyed with ice-cream. A group photo experience with executives of the plant.

In typical Colombian tradition, one is officially pronounced Colombian by having a bracelet with the Colombian national colours of gold, blue, and red placed on one’s wrist.

The trip goes on with visits to several other factories, such as candy and lollipop manufacturers, as well as producers of jarred exotic fruits, etc. Overall, the scenery from town to town was breathtaking.

In the picture one can see the beauty of nature at its best colours. The panoramic view of a beautiful village within the Filandia and Armenia area, taken from the top of a hill.

On a clear day from this vantage point, it seems like one can see forever. On the journey to each city to view a different factory, street vendors were encountered providing the group with a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. Needless to say, enjoying a glass
of fresh squeezed papaya, guava, mango, lulo, mora, guanabana, or in general any exotic fruit cocktail that is considered exclusive in most countries, was very affordable everywhere in Colombia, being that these fruits grow naturally there.

Bamboo is used everywhere, even for building bridges. The next picture reflects a short detour in the trip which allowed Jairo to visit his old neighbourhood and friends whom he had not seen for many, many years. As you can see from the picture, they were happy to see each other.

Arriving at the next stop, the city of Bogota, one could notice immediately that the weather was leaning more towards the chilly side. Short sleeves were no longer favourable as the temperature fluctuated because of the high-altitude of the city.

On first sight one notices quickly that it was very clean (considering the population exceeds the 7 million inhabitants), and built in modern architecture. Green houses everywhere to protect the flower petals from the rain storms.

Every weekend, some of the roads are closed to vehicles, and people enjoy relaxing walks, biking, shopping, and generally browsing the city streets.
without the stress, noise, and air-pollution of cars. Cafeterias, restaurants, and shops are crowded to the point of making one think that it is a national holiday celebration.

It made much more sense at this point why Colombia gives openly the impression of a stress-free country, with friendly and polite people, constantly smiling faces, and the lowest violence and crime incidents. Even doing business here becomes a pleasurable event!

There is no doubt one could spend days touring the various attractions of the city. However due to limited free time, the Canadian group of delegates chose to visit one of the most famous attractions in Bogota: the Gold Museum.

This was really a golden experience. Travelling along in Bogota, we also had the opportunity to visit the Catedral de Sal, a marvelous attraction which is well hidden at the back of the hill-face, and which one could easily miss if there was no guide.
The experienced tour guide, Stella, (centre, in the picture) having been in the tourist industry for 30 years, knew her way around very well, and directed the group to the Cathedral while explaining the history and other interesting aspects of the site. Entering and touring this attraction was an unforgettable experience.

The cross in one of the underground churches extended to 75 feet high, salt sculptures of amazing detail were displayed. Each work of art, including the copy of the famous Michelangelo piece from the Sistine Chapel, and everything around, stood tall and unbelievably beautiful totally made of salt. At the end of the cave there was a chapel and several people have been seen praying. One of them was myself.

When I was asked what I prayed for, I said that I asked God to give me energy and courage to walk all the way back to the top since I had an accident on my leg some years ago.

After all the educational stops to various outstanding attractions, as mentioned above, the next stop was to relax and recuperate in a typical restaurant.

The place could not be easily located from the outside, because it was covered in rims from tires, wheel covers, antique torches, and various other items hanging from trees and covering the entrance. Inside though, at first sight one remains with his mouth wide open.
It seemed the owner of the restaurant had spent years collecting antiques and decorating items from all-over the world of all kinds, which were hanging everywhere, creating a marvellous ceiling of unique selections.

Despite that it was 4pm, and the place was populated to capacity (1,000 people and counting), luck had it that there was a table available for the group as well.

Food was served in small wooden dishes and everything in the menu was delicious.

The table was next to the disk jockey; a safe guess would be that there were hundreds of CDs inside. Latin American music filled the atmosphere, people conversed happily, and entertainers walked around dressed like mimes, police officers, fire fighters, clowns, etc.

Fortune tellers and nail decorators visited each table, and jugglers provided wonderful shows.

Every 30 minutes, the waitresses assembled together, each with a balloon in hand, and danced around in a circle in a traditional Colombian way.

Needless to say, the place was filled with crazy, endless energy.

We were informed that all the waitresses were university students with very high marks.

The group had the opportunity to meet the owner as well, who, despite his humour and his ‘acting like crazy’ manners, which was the trademark behaviour of everyone in the restaurant, was a very intelligent and welcoming man.

He actually refused an offer placed from one of the delegates to buy the whole place for 20 million dollars!

In the picture you can see his reaction saying: “Are you crazy?”
A small parenthesis is made here to share an unbelievable experience in a different restaurant. Among the waitresses, the youngest expert in sandwich preparation had the willingness to prepare a delicious starter for a couple Canadians, who could not believe such mouth-watering taste came from the hands of a chef who was less than 6 years old!

Shopping in Colombia is like a full-time job. There are so many things to see and so many items to choose from.

But since our luggage was filled to capacity from samples of products from the various factories, we actually only went window shopping.

The selections offered were incredible: anything from wedding gowns to bathing suits, jeans, t-shirts, lingerie, perfumes.

Women could shop till they drop.

We did not see many items for men since suits and ties are not favourable due to the weather conditions.

Men simply settle for a t-shirt and slacks or shorts.

Since I am in the food business maybe I am shortsighted. However, I have noticed among other things that everywhere I have been, including the exhibition grounds, that there was an abundance of flowers everywhere.

It was then that I realized that
Colombia is the flower capital of the world. We do not have enough space to portray all of them. However, I have included this selection for your pleasure.

I would like to incorporate a short write-up with the following title:

POTATO SOUP AJIACO (Bogota’s Potato Soup)

Colombia es passion!

Hola, everyone.

If you are already proficient at making Potato Soup, you may feel that this recipe is totally unnecessary.
However, if you would like to learn something new, and to entertain yourself at the same time, this recipe is tailor-made for you.

Of course, I spent some time in researching the information before I presented it. And since I do not cut and paste, or steal recipes from here and there; I communicated the following information:

While I was in Colombia I was taken to dinner in the city of Bogota to try the famous Bogota Ajiaco Soup.

Needless to say, this soup is a favourite of Colombians on a cool night.

We Canadians cannot understand what they mean when they say “on a cool night”, when the average temperature there is over 30 degrees year round, and we mean Celsius not Fahrenheit.

However, in Bogota, the capital of Colombia, where the elevation is quite high, the temperature is quite chilly some nights of the year. And just imagine, only 100 kilometers from Bogota one could experience a heat wave.

That is why Colombians, in Bogota, enjoy this dish more than anything else in this world.

Being who I am, whenever I encounter a dish that impresses me, I proceed to the kitchen and speak directly to the chef. In this particular instance, when I tried to complement the chef and find out how the soup is made, the chef proceeded to explain in Spanish. I do not speak Spanish so the conversation was one-sided.

Consequently, I made a reservation to learn about this recipe at another time. The right time was just a few weeks ago when I visited a Colombian friend’s house in Toronto, Canada and to my surprise I was treated to this particular soup. I did not want to miss this opportunity to learn this recipe in detail and I was told the following:

2-4 chicken breasts
3- 4 cloves of garlic
1–2 onions
1 can of Mr. Goudas Chicken Broth with NO MSG
2 yellow potatoes
2 white potatoes
1 Can Whole Kernel Corn
1 bunch scallions
(a variety of green onion available in Caribbean or Latin Stores)
1 bunch cilantro (coriander)
4 tablespoons guascas*
1 cup heavy cream
1/2 cup capers
2 avocados
Salt and Pepper to taste.

*There is no word in English for guascas. It is very difficult to explain the taste but it tastes similar to oregano and may be purchased in Latin and South American stores.
Oregano is not a substitute for guascas, only the taste is similar. I suggest that you do not try to hide it in your luggage from South America because you may be detained at Customs until your leaves are identified.

Should you encounter difficulty finding this guascas, then, without it, you cannot call the soup Ajiago.

The night before, marinate the chicken breasts with garlic, onion and salt.

The next day, place the breasts in a casserole, add water, cover and cook until the chicken is tender.

Transfer the chicken to a platter once it is cooked. Remove the skin and cut the chicken breasts into strips.

Cut the yellow potatoes into small pieces, place in the juice left over from the chicken, and boil until they are partially cooked.

Add 1 can of chicken broth.

Cut the scallions into small pieces.

Dice the white potatoes. Add the scallions, cilantro, diced potatoes, guascas, salt and pepper to taste.

Continue cooking until the yellow potatoes are melted and have become smooth and creamy, and the white potatoes are fully cooked.

For effective presentation, you may remove the bunch of cilantro.

To serve this soup, pour it in a clay bowl...for some reason or another it just tastes better that way! (I recall as a young boy while working in the clay factory, that the yogurt always tasted better in a clay bowl).

In four separate bowls place the chicken strips, corn, capers and the cream, and allow each person to self-serve as much as they care to.

With respect to the avocados, cut them into halves, remove the seeds, slice...
from the inside without cutting the skin and allow each person to use a small spoon to take portions out.

Needless to say, if you are a potato lover, this will become your most favourite potato dish.

“I hope you had a wonderful time reading this recipe. ‘Colombia es passion’ and that is their trademark. They are passionate about their food. And I believe that once you taste this Ajiaco Soup you will become as passionate as they are about it.”

I would like to extend my sincerest thank you to Senora Maria Vargas, pictured below, for the time she took to provide me with this wonderful recipe.

Advice to men.

Please avoid taking your wife/girlfriend/companion to the emerald and gold boutiques! Your pockets will be severely and irreparably damaged.

Native Colombian craft boutiques are so wonderful that they are hazardous to your wealth.

The crafts are so beautiful, creative, and original, they attract women like bees to flowers. And believe me, I am speaking from a personal point of view.

There are seven women in my office and I had to purchase a souvenir for each one especially my private secretary who is turning sixty-nine years young, and refuses to retire!

I purchased seven bracelets and necklaces at a very reasonable price from one of the street vendors who told me that they were real precious stones, including diamonds and emeralds.

He was even willing to give me a hand written and personally signed by him certificate of authenticity in Spanish (which I did not understand anyway).

Since I am in the food business, I have no knowledge about diamonds and emeralds and I had no reason to doubt what so ever that a legitimate Colombian street vendor would lie to me.

Upon my return to the office, I presented the precious presents to the ladies in the office. Each one immediately hugged me and I was graced with seven kisses.
In Conclusion...

The next day, the group of Canadian delegates left Colombia with the best impressions.

They all pointed out the natural beauty of the country, the great weather conditions, the friendly and polite people, all of them well-dressed, especially the Colombian women who are blessed from God with beauty.

The warm greetings and the sincere welcome into every place and every event. Also, the professionalism demonstrated in conducting business, the intelligence and broad knowledge of every business person we encountered.

The huge variety of fruits and vegetables, and as a result the rich collection of related products.

The amazing tourist attractions and the welcoming attitude of all tour guides and other people in the industry.

The strong trust of people for their government and their demonstrated loyalty.

Finally, the clean streets and markets, despite the high population numbers everywhere, the well-equipped factories, with excellent sanitary conditions and technologically advanced procedures, as well as hard-workers with great skills in their tasks.

It is strongly suggested, when visiting this country, to avoid driving yourself around since taxis are available everywhere and are very affordable.

Additionally, given that every inch around is a beautiful sight to behold, one should be free of any distraction to enjoy the scenery to its fullest.

It was the general consensus that Mr. Rodolfo Moseres Dieppa and Mr. Rafael Vargas had outdone themselves in arranging this conference.

Everything including accommodations, meetings schedules, meals, tours of factories, shopping sites, cities and national treasures were very well thought out and executed.

A very special thank you is extended to these two very professional gentlemen who left no small detail unattended.

To Jairo Gomez and Paola Puccini Lizarazo who were ever present and poured their hearts into every moment of my Colombian experience, “gracias”.

I will forever treasure this experience in my heart with passion.

Colombia es pasion!

Spyros Peter Goudas
If you have any comment about this booklet please sent it to cnn@cnnads.com