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SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

Eco-escapes in the Colombian rainforest

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

“Do you know anything about permaculture?”

Santiago Giraldo raises an eyebrow at my blank stare, before carrying on with a definition, one that sums up the concept of the Cannua lodge, a chic eco-retreat in the hills east of Medellín, Colombia.

“Permaculture is the philosophy of design based on the observation of nature,” Giraldo says. “It started as an agricultural practice in the 1980s, then migrated into a social and environmental field as well.”

With Cannua, created under the principles of permaculture, co-founder Giraldo and the team are trying to not merely sustain the land here, but regenerate it. “Sustainability told us that we need to leave places exactly the same way we found them. Permaculture is telling us we need to leave those places better.”

The lodge’s 10 rooms and eight bungalows are spartan yet elegant. High bamboo ceilings, natural materials and brick walls made of excavated dirt lay the lodge vibe on thick, and I can’t take my eyes off the sunset view of the San Nicolás valley. There are no TVs or fancy amenities like hot tubs, the intention being to have guests reconnect with nature via bird watching, heritage hiking trails, community tours and cooking classes.

The surrounding 10-hectare forest, which was once pastureland, is now lush and green, dotted with gardens that supply plants to the kitchen. Sixty per cent of the restaurant’s ingredients are grown on-site, Giraldo estimates. A quick tour has us tasting herbs and edible flowers in different patches along the trails.

The rest of the ingredients are sourced from nearby farms, with 80



Cannua is an eco-conscious hospitality project based on the principles of permaculture.

CANNUA

per cent of the staff coming from the local villages as well. Dinner is a taste sensation, everything so fresh and seasonal, with a cultural focus on rescuing lost flavours.

“We don’t use pesticides or herbicides, and we don’t fight with insects,” Giraldo says. “If insects arrive to our gardens, we leave that garden for the insects. We understand that food is for everybody, and ‘everybody’ includes insects and animals.”

Towing the sustainability line

doesn’t always have a happy ending. An eco-friendly (and expensive) swimming pool was in the works — until a particularly rare endemic toad moved in. Sadly for guests, the pool is now just the toad pond, but it’s an example of how far Cannua’s commitment extends.

“We started the project in 2015, when Colombia was dealing with the peace process,” Giraldo says, referring to the 2016 peace accord that ended decades of civil conflict. “So for us, Cannua was also an op-

portunity to show the rural areas in Colombia that there’s another way to do business.”

Others have followed suit. Cannua is part of a group of like-minded, eco-focused hotels and lodges called Secretos de Colombia (“secrets of Colombia”), all striving to create self-sufficient, sustainable properties, integrating landscape and people.

South of the city of Manizales, El Nido del Condor (“the nest of the condor”) is one such place, a family-run property of five safari-style tents in the Andean mountain range. Accessible only by cable car, it sits on a plateau yielding 360-degree views of avocado fields and deep canyons, very close to the nest of two condors, an endangered species. Guests enjoy trekking and biking, hot springs, horseback riding and, of course, bird watching.

More glamping can be found in the simple yet stylish open-air cabins of La Manigua Lodge in the dry tropical forest of Serranía de la Macarena. The region is famous for the nearby Caño Cristales, a river filled with colourful *Macarenia clavigera* plants that bloom in the water. La Manigua’s cabins suit two to five guests, who sink into the serene parkland and take in trekking, boat tours, sport fishing and cacao workshops.

Originally, the prospective investors that Giraldo approached with the idea for Cannua thought he was crazy. But now, they’re at his door, looking for the next big eco-friendly thing.

“In the past, Colombia didn’t have the infrastructure for responsible natural tourism,” he says. “Now we trust more in our nature — and in ourselves.”

DOUG WALLACE TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF PROCOLOMBIA, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.