

From New Jersey to Macondo

EDITORIAL AND PHOTO BY TERENCE BAKER



The novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez, allots Colombia a magical luminescence and transformed me into a reader. A decade ago, I visited its capital, Bogotá, and the beautiful hill town of Villa de Leyva, but was told the northern Caribbean region that raised Márquez was too dangerous—*guerrillas*, paramilitaries, lawlessness. Today, Colombia is reborn, its ne'er-do-wells having re-entered society or hidden in pockets close to Colombia's frontiers.

Márquez's groundbreaking work of *magico-realism* is why I learned Spanish. I yearned to follow in the 83-year-old's footsteps, even if it meant seeing things with rose-tinted glasses, which isn't a baseless method of perusing things. Exploring destinations through literature—beautiful prose, memorable characters—is as advantageous, I feel, as doing it through history.


Where to begin? In Barranquilla, Colombia's workhorse port, an interesting, ramshackle city where Márquez started as a journalist and the River Magdalena meets the Caribbean Sea. He met friends at La Cueva, a grocery that today would be unrecognizable to Márquez in its guise as an excellent restaurant. From it, I sat looking at what I imagined to be the Street of the Turks in the fictional town of

Macondo, Márquez's greatest invention, I "saw" Márquez walking along bustling Calle 35, sipping coffee at El Prado, South America's oldest upscale hotel, and walking past residential architecture that tells of migration from Syria, England and Germany. Another of his characters, Aureliano Segundo, loves a party, so it was easy to imagine him at El Trajo, a raucous, roadside bar where I sat amid faultless salsa dancers.

Márquez built Macondo on the "bank of a river of clear water that ran alongside a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs," and I hiked to where I believe it was built (who cares if never existed) in Tayrona's rainforest: Hummingbirds and tarantulas flitted and scuttled, hard-to-reach beaches (see photo) alongside gigantic boulders evoked the Elysian Fields and swarms of yellow butterflies fluttered around me as they did Mauricio Babilonia during all his appearances in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Sitting covered in mud in the aperture of Totumo Volcano, in itself an experience of *magico-realism*, I pictured in the adjacent jungle preserved Spanish galleons, plagues of insomnia, Remedios the Beauty swept up to heaven in the folds of washing hung out to dry and the slow plodding by—between fighting 32 wars and making little gold fishes—of one of Márquez's notable characters, Colonel Aureliano Buendía. A sign alerted drivers not to run over anteaters (*osos hormigueros*, that is, ant-eating bears). In La Guajira, I bought crafts from desert-dwelling Wayuu Indians, whom inspired Márquez's novella, *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother*.

I felt particularly wondrous in La Ciénaga, marshlands that the early residents of Macondo thought impossible to traverse. In the Termales de Córdoba, soaking in barely lit hot springs, I saw swoop bats the size of dinner plates and heard a train behind thick foliage that I pretended did not carry coal from Aracataca (Márquez's birthplace) but the 3,000 dead bodies resulting from Macondo's infamous episode, the massacre of banana-plantation workers.

When it rains—anywhere—I transform what I see into Macondo, thus never having to bemoan bad weather, for in Macondo, it "rained for four years, eleven months and two days...the air was so damp that fish could have come in through the doors and swum out of the windows." Colombia: A land of majesty, wonder, enchantment—people little changed over centuries; sit-in volcanoes; oversized bats; elusive anteaters; biblical downpours; celebrated cities; "ghost" trains, and a novel that sold more than 30 million copies and is the reason one earnest traveler decided to enter Rutgers University to study literature. 

Terence Baker is travel editor of this magazine.