



Footprints in the FOREST



Ciudad Perdida faded into obscurity during the Spanish conquest and was only 'rediscovered' in the 1970s. Today this ancient Lost City is the highlight of Colombia's most exciting trekking adventure. **BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE**

▲ *On the third day, intrepid trekkers are greeted by eight river crossings before they finally reach the foot of the never-ending stone staircase up to the sacred city*

Located in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta National Park of northern Colombia, Ciudad Perdida (Spanish for 'Lost City') was the ancient political and manufacturing hub of the Tairona people. Founded around AD 800, some 650 years earlier than its more illustrious Peruvian neighbour Machu Picchu, it housed up to 8,000 inhabitants before it was abandoned in the 16th century. Although the indigenous Kogi Indians always knew of the ancient city's existence, Ciudad Perdida was only rediscovered in 1972 when a group of local treasure hunters found a series of stone steps rising up from the river. Even today, the only way to access the city is via an exhausting climb up a flight of over 1,200 stone steps through dense jungle



▲ The Santa Marta area was for many years off-limits to tourists due to the Colombian Civil War. However, with hostilities waning and the Colombian army actively patrolling the route, treks to the Lost City reopened in 2005 and today the region is deemed very safe for visitors



▲ For decades, local farmers were conscripted by Colombian rebel forces and forced to illegally grow and refine coca leaves to produce the illicit drug cocaine for the guerrillas. With the rebels finally evicted from the region, these old farmers are struggling to readjust to their old way of life

On the edge of a small stream and using only the most basic equipment, a peasant farmer demonstrates how he refines coca leaves to produce cocaine ►



Kogi Indians are believed to be direct descendants of the Tairona who built and occupied Ciudad Perdida around 1,200 years ago ▶

River crossings are seldom more than waist deep, but in the rainy season (May to October) water levels can swell to chin height and the river has to be crossed with the help of safety ropes and karabiners ▼



The 44 km six-day return hike to the Lost City requires a good level of physical fitness, as this moderately difficult trek includes a number of river crossings, steep climbs and descents ▼



▲ Looking at a picture of what Ciudad Perdida looks like gives you an inkling of what to expect, but no photo can do justice to the jaw-dropping 360-degree view that hits you as you step on to its uppermost terraces