Report to The Explorers Club on Expedition to the Caño Cristales River, Colombia, with Flag #97
From Peter Rowe-Fl’08

Ten years ago, following a screening of one of my films about extreme forces of nature, an audience member came up to tell me that he thought I might be interested to hear about a fantastic multi-colored river in Colombia. I did look into it, and it did sound magical, but it took me a decade before I finally got around to explore the Caño Cristales River.

The unique crystal-clear river is colored by the Macarenia Clavigera aquatic plant that grows into shades of Peach, Neon Green, Light Pink, Scarlet Red and Purple. It is appropriate that the wildly colored river is deep in the Colombian jungle - for the country is famous not just for its wild biodiversity, but also for its surreal magical quality.

At the Lowell Thomas Awards dinner in Toronto in October, 2017, I was presented with Explorers Club flag #97 to take to the river with my partner on the expedition, and daughter, Brianna Rowe (SM’11). Two weeks later we met up in Bogotá in order to head down to the jungle. I was amazed by the red river, and accomplished my decade-long goal of photographing this site. But there was
a bonus. On our last day, we discovered an utterly unique site. Deep in the jungle, and on a difficult climb up a steep mountain, there is indigenous art that in the modern era had been previously seen by fewer than 15 people, and never before by any non-Colombians.

The goals of the expedition were threefold. First was photographing the red river for my photo book documenting the red places and creatures on the earth, titled “Red Planet.” The Caño Cristales is one of the final subjects for the book. I have already photographed in Congo, Tobago, Nova Scotia, Vanuatu, Northern Ontario, Utah, Arizona, Hawaii, Italy and Indonesia. I only have four spots left to photograph – Horseshoe Bend canyon in Arizona, the Zhangye Danxia geological formation in western China, the Red Desert of Namibia and the Fly Geyser in Nevada. The Caño Cristales has been on top of my bucket list for years.

The second goal of our expedition was to transmit a live report back to North American schools about the river via BGAN and satellite through Joe Grabowski’s Ontario-based educational organization Exploring by the Seat of Your Pants (funded by the National Geographic Society), and through Reach the World, the New York City - based NGO that Brianna manages.
The third goal was to investigate the state of the river, see what sort of shape it is in, and what threats there may be to the continued health of this unique ecosystem, and report these back to the Explorers Club.

It has only been within the past ten years that it has been safe to visit the river, for it was caught up for many years in the Colombian Civil War, and was right in the center of the strong-hold territory of FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). With the peace agreement started in 2012 and signed on October 2, 2016, it now seems completely safe to travel through the area of the Caño Cristales, though there are still coca leaves growing on the farms, military helicopters flying overhead, and, presumably, ex-FARC guerillas and ex-paramilitaries still a part of the community.

We travelled by charter plane from Bogotá to the town of La Macarena, and from there travelled by river boats (fast 40 foot motorized canoes), then by 4 X 4’s, finally by hiking in the last few kilometers to the river. We found that the Colombians are taking strong precautions to try to insure the purity of the river environment. A permit must be obtained long before visiting the river. Only a small number of people are allowed to visit each day. Security
personnel, including soldiers from the Colombian army, protect the river, and check to prevent any damage to it. Searches are made to insure no one brings in any sunscreen, bug repellent or other chemicals that might harm the aquatic vegetation. No cigarettes, water bottles or other potential plastic garbage is allowed. Any food brought in must be wrapped only in banana leaves.

We arrived right at the end of the rainy season, which runs from May until November. In December, the dry season begins, the river dries up and the colors largely disappear. However, the river was there in force while we explored. Our translator explained that the locals find that their climate is changing and the seasons are no longer predictable. Close to the Equator, the site is of course tropical, which gave us great hospitable temperatures for exploring both along the banks and in the water of the crystal clear river.

Colombia is one of the most biodiverse countries on earth, and in this part of the country one can find monkeys, turtles, caimans, iquanas, anteaters, many birds including macaws, parrots and the endemic stinkybirds (or, if you prefer Latin to that evocative name, *Opisthocomus Hoazin*), and many snakes, including the massive anaconda.
The river appeared to be well-protected and in pristine condition. A recent analysis by the Instituto de Investigacion de Recursos Biologicos Alexander Von Humboldt recently declared it to be in good health, but reiterated how extremely fragile and vulnerable it is to human impacts. One of the most potentially damaging threats to this unique and extraordinary river is a proposed oil drilling and fracking operation by Hupecol that is very close to it. Colombians, both in the area of La Macarena and on the national level, are fighting this proposed oil operation, and the Texas-based company is trying to sue the Colombian government to allow it to continue.

Brianna successfully transmitted by satellite directly from the river to classrooms from Brooklyn to Erin, Ontario to Montana. Her report is available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fi05V9b9I9w&app=desktop.

It was extraordinary to witness, photograph and document this beautiful river. While we were there, we were able to have an even more unique experience. I had heard rumors that in the last two years’ discoveries had been made of indigenous rock paintings by the now-
extinct Twigjas, Guayupes, Witotos and Guayaberos tribes that lived in the area long before the arrival of the conquistadors. While I asked all our guides and translators if they knew anything about the rumored sites, it was not possible to visit them. However, our second-to-last day, we connected with Walther Ramos, a tough young local adventurer, who told us about paintings that he discovered on a mountain side. If we were up to it, he offered to take us there.

At dawn on our last day, we set out by long canoe ride and then a very strenuous climb up El Mirador Mountain, bushwhacking through heavy jungle to two amazing cliff-faces high above the Guayabera River, where paintings in red ochre were still very visible on the grey rock. One painting was quite obviously that of a woman, another a caiman. There were many others, which perhaps future explorers can decipher. Walther, speaking through our translator Gina Torres, told us he has discovered 37 sites of the indigenous art, but that only 15 people had seen them – and that the two of us were the very first non-Colombians to see the paintings. His guess was that they were 350-500 years old, but perhaps much, much older.

Some of the sites he has discovered are two to eight day hikes from the river. He and his friends have also
discovered caves which he suspects may also contain art, however so far he has not had the equipment or resources to explore them. There is a great opportunity for ambitious explorers and cavers to undertake, with Walther as their guide. Who knows – there may be prehistoric cave art as unique as the recent discoveries in the south of France, deep in the South American jungle.

By Peter Rowe (FI’08)