

**C A L I  
COLOMBIA:  
Salsa Rhythms  
and Sexy Birds**



**AUTHENTIC CULTURE**



**EPIC BIRDING**



**FRIENDSHIP**

**TRAVEL JOURNAL**



**BIRDS & BEATS IN THE SALSA  
CAPITAL OF THE WORLD**

With a trip name like “Salsa Rhythms and Sexy Birds”, you know this will be something other than a traditional birding tour. Three years ago, I visited the northern area of Colombia so I was looking forward to experiencing a different region of the country. I love to go birding, but it’s not just about racking up numbers of species. I love to see all the places, eat all the food and meet all the people. I planned this trip so long ago I began to feel it was never going to happen, but here I am on a plane heading to Cali, Colombia filled with anticipation. Having traveled with Birding by Bus in the past, I know I am in for a treat and that Marc and Eliana will indeed make this something other than a traditional birding tour.



**WRITTEN BY:  
KATHY  
ROHE**

**2023 TOUR  
PARTICIPANT**

**PHOTOS BY:  
BIRDING BY BUS**

## DAY 1 | ARRIVAL IN CALI



After a long day of travel, it is so good to come out of the airport into the light and see Eliana wrapped in the Colombian flag waving to me and welcoming me to Colombia. We gather our group and get into the bus for the hour and a half ride to our accommodations. Our bus twists and turns along winding roads, up and down the Western Andes Mountains. The roads are very well maintained and I am impressed with how clean the country appears.

At last, we arrive at the Araucana Lodge, our home for the next week. My first impression of the lodge is light and air. Large windows in the front and back give the feeling of openness. Fresh air flows through the entry and dining room. My room is a suite with a large sitting room and an equally large bedroom, both with sliding doors to the outside overlooking the forest. There is a large bathroom with a giant shower. Fresh flowers add that extra touch that makes me feel welcome. We will only have to unpack once since this is our only lodge, so I really feel like this is my home for the week.

We all meet for a welcome dinner. After introductions, I get the impression this is going to be a great group. We are a diverse group of young and older, new and experienced birders. Roger, our local guide gives us an idea of what to expect tomorrow. Eliana and Marc present us each with a bag of gifts — they are so thoughtful. Off to bed to prepare for an early rise tomorrow to begin birding. I am so excited!



## DAY 2 | DOÑA DORA &amp; THE UPPER ANCHICAYA



We left the lodge at 5:15am to drive an hour to Doña Dora's place. I have heard a lot about this birding hotspot. Doña Dora's little family restaurant grew from her love of the birds that visit her yard. Encouraged by birders who wanted to see the birds that visit her yard, she kept expanding until now she has a very popular restaurant with an array of feeders that attract

many hard-to-see birds. We enjoyed watching specialties including Toucan Barbet (my favorite), Red-headed Barbet, Purple-crowned Fairy, Empress Brilliant, Glistening-green Tanager, and many others while drinking coffee. We ate a delicious brunch which featured fresh fruit, scrambled eggs and the best cheese empanadas I have ever had. We climbed to a balcony with gorgeous views of the valley and walked on the road to do some more birding. We watched Ornate Flycatchers fly back and forth across the road and further on we were entertained by Cinnamon Flycatchers. All along the way, Roger is on high alert watching and listening for birds. This pays off, as most of the birds we find Roger was aware of by ear long before they came into view. Our little walk was also rewarded with great close views of a roosting Lyre-tailed Nightjar.

On a personal note, I was excited to meet Diego Calderon, a well-known Colombian birder and host of The Birders Show, who was also birding at Doña Dora's that day. I have followed Diego on



YouTube and Instagram for years and originally, he was the one to inspire me to come to Colombia (through the documentary movie, “The Birders”). It was a pleasure to finally meet him in person. Before we left, we got an impromptu salsa lesson, and all ended up dancing on the restaurant patio — what fun!

We drove back to the Araucana Lodge and spent the rest of the afternoon birding the grounds at the lodge which also has very nice feeders. The fruit feeders attracted Colombian Chachalaca, Red-headed Barbet and a host of tanagers including Flame-rumped, Bay-headed, and Golden Tanager. The hummingbird feeders attracted Black-throated Mango, White-necked Jacobin, Crowned Woodnymph, Purple-throated Woodstar, and others. We learned the history of the lodge which was built on the grounds of the owner’s grandfather. There is an organic garden which grows much of the food served here. The old Araucana tree (Monkey Puzzle tree) stands over the property, a tree the grandfather brought to Colombia from Chile in the 1950’s. We were treated with a traditional Christmas treat: buñuelos (little round cheese breads) and hot chocolate.



After a delicious dinner, we got out our bird checklists and did our first bird count. We all shared the highlight of our day. Mine was, not surprisingly, meeting Diego, but also watching the little Ornate Flycatchers fly back and forth over the road. Small moments are often the most remembered and treasured.

## DAY 3 | FINCA LA FLORIDA



We left again very early at 5:15am for a short drive to Finca La Florida, situated in the cloud forest at 6,600 feet on the Kilometer 18 section of the New Buenaventura Road. We gathered at a blind before sunrise, sitting very quietly hoping for the appearance of the Scaled Antpitta that

the owners have trained to come to a feeding station. We waited for a half hour while our host played and replayed a call the antpitta sometimes responds to. After a half hour with no success, we resigned ourselves that nature does not always respond on demand.

There was a delicious breakfast of fresh fruit and pericos (scrambled eggs with finely chopped onion and tomato), a traditional Colombian breakfast and of course — rich Colombian coffee. I tried and enjoyed a new fruit, granadilla, which is very different from anything I've eaten. We stayed for the morning to watch the many birds that visited the feeders. We were delighted by the endemic Multicolored Tanager, Blue-winged Mountain Tanager, Saffron-crowned Tanager and many more. One of my favorite moments was watching a mother and father Colombian Chachalaca feed their young chick.

A little before noon we walked from La Florida down the road to do some roadside birding where we picked up a few more birds, including skulkers like Uniform Antshrike, Red-faced Spinetail, and Long-



billed Gnatwren. We took a drive in the bus to a nearby reserve, San Felipe, where we had another delightful meal. The highlight was a dessert of coffee flan. We all wanted the recipe and Eliana promises to pass it along. After lunch I think we all needed a little break, so we carried the couch pillows from the lodge out onto the lawn and laid in the sun. How nice it was to just slow down, enjoy the sun and that beautiful blue sky and acknowledge where we were.

Roger found for us an endemic frog species, Boettger's Colombian Tree Frog (*Dendropsophus columbianus*), that we all got a close look at. San Felipe also has a nice feeder setup where we spent the rest of the afternoon. We were rewarded with great views of the shy Chestnut Wood-Quail. Of course, no day in the Cali area is complete without a little salsa dancing, so another impromptu lesson, a little music, and some more dancing! Back at the lodge we enjoyed another great dinner and added plenty of new birds to our checklists.



## DAY 4 | CALI CITY TOUR

On the way into the city, we picked up our guide, Vivian, for our cultural experience. Our first stop was the market, Mercado Alameda. I love a good local market and this one did not disappoint. It is a huge market selling every kind of flower, herb, fruit and vegetable. As we walked around the market, Eliana and Vivian pointed out different kinds of fruits and bought a few for us to try. Some were great and some not so much. The colors and flavors were a treat for the senses. Outside we saw an artisan craft market. Here I met a Colombian couple with whom I had a very nice conversation. We spoke in Spanish which was a challenge for me but which I enjoyed so much. They wanted to welcome me to Colombia and know what my impressions of Cali were. Did I like it, find it beautiful? They hoped I loved it as much as they do. What a beautiful few minutes connecting with some locals.

We went on to take a little walking tour of the city, which is all decorated for Christmas. Trees are laden with lighted ornaments and large freestanding holiday decorations line the streets. It's very festive. I can imagine coming here at night celebrating the season. Next stop was the Archeology Museum for a private tour. We learned about the people of ancient times, their art and way of perceiving the world. We enjoyed a



delicious lunch in a vegetarian restaurant and then headed to the park along the river that featured the iconic bronze sculpture, the Gato del Rio. This city park features sculptures by many local artists who have taken the theme of cats and created very individual interpretations.

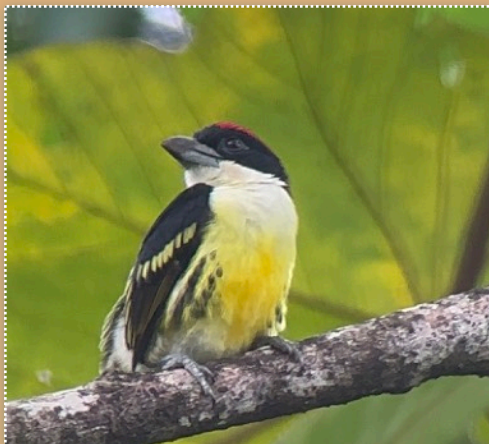
The final and most exciting destination of the day was a visit to El Mulato Cabaret for a salsa dance lesson. A quick shot of aguardiente, a.k.a. Colombian fire-water, prepared us for the fun. Here, a very energetic instructor led us through a series of lessons to prepare us to dance the Salsa Caleña. Let me tell you, this is not your everyday dance. It is fast, really fast! By the end of our lesson, we were all panting for breath, but having so much fun. We were treated to a rehearsal for a show by the professional dancers here and took a group photo with the master. Then we returned to the bus for the ride back to the lodge. On the way, to keep the fun going, we played a musical game of “Name that Tune”. As we got off the bus, Eliana asked if we had a fun day. I responded, “one of the best days of my life.” It really was a day to remember.





## DAY 5 | SAN CIPRIANO

Today's adventure was one I had been especially looking forward to, so I didn't mind getting up way before sunrise. We drove two hours in the dark over the Andes and westward to the town of Cordoba in the Choco-Pacific Lowlands. Once there, we required a very unusual form of transport. We boarded the "Brujitas" which are the only way to get to the town of San Cipriano. These motorcycle powered railcars showcase the resourcefulness of the Colombian people. The tracks that they run on were once used by trains that carried goods from the port to the town of Cordoba and on to all parts of Colombia. When a major highway replaced the need for the train, the tracks were taken over by the locals who now access otherwise remote villages using the Brujitas. Using spare parts and powered by motorcycles, this form of transport is essential to the locals and a fun adventure for us tourists.



Traveling by railcart through the forest, we arrived in San Cipriano where we were met by Never, our local guide, and Gilson, a young aspiring guide. We walked through the village and on to the San Cipriano Reserve, a very bird-rich hotspot. Here we saw the Baudo Guan, Black-breasted Puffbird, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Choco Toucan, Five-colored Barbet, and many other Choco specialties. Never's family prepared a delicious breakfast for us in their home. I am always humbled by the hospitality of the Colombian people who open their homes and property to allow us to enjoy the birds. We continued birding the area until lunchtime when we visited a small restaurant along the trail for another fine meal. We lucked out weather-wise here. Except for a very brief shower, the rain, usually heavy here, held off all day. My favorite bird of the day was the Golden-collared Manakin. Another Brujita ride took us back to Cordoba, then our tour van for the ride home to the lodge.

## DAY 6 | SONSO LAGOON

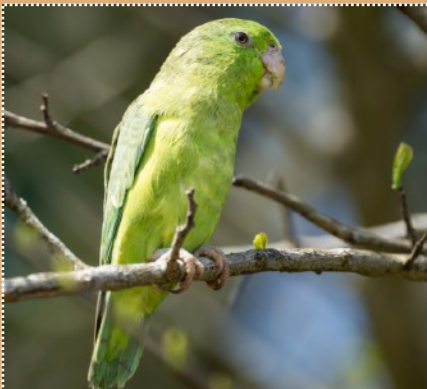


When you realize that this is your last full day of birding, you take advantage of every second. This was the case today. We traveled to a different kind of habitat, a wetland habitat in the Cauca Valley between the Western and Central Andes. On the way to our main destination, we made a quick roadside stop that allowed us great views of Horned Screamers in a field. Arriving at the reserve, we were joined by Michael, a local guide from the area. We walked a section of road where we saw a Common Potoo, one of my favorite birds, and a Lesser Nighthawk. Continuing along the road we were rewarded with views of the endemic Grayish Piculet, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, and a pair of Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher.

After a delicious breakfast on site, we walked the path to the Sonso Lagoon, a beautiful trail lined with mature trees draped with Spanish moss. In the river, we saw several species including Anhinga, Bare-faced Ibis, Wattled Jacana, and Black-bellied Whistling Duck, along with Amazon, Green, and Ringed Kingfisher. At the Lagoon we were treated to a very rare sighting of a Pinnated Bittern, a bird known to be there but seldom seen. Many expected wetland birds were spotted in the Lagoon including Whimbrel,



Black-crowned Night Heron, Striated Heron, and a variety of sandpipers.



At the main building of the Reserve, we saw close to a hundred Spectacled Parrotlets flying from their nesting holes to the trees and back. We had lunch and a short break and then continued birding walking along the road. Thanks to Roger's persistence and hard work, we saw some secretive forest

birds including Bar-crested Antshrike, Jet Antbird, and Apical Flycatcher, among others. Just before leaving, we spotted a Striped Cuckoo and a Little Cuckoo to my personal delight. This is by no means a complete list of all the birds we saw, but rather the highlights for me. We had a pleasant ride back to the lodge a lovely dinner and of course, the checklist.

## DAY 7 | INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS HOME

This morning we had the option of getting up early and doing some birding or sleeping in a little later and doing some packing. I took the second option and enjoyed my morning coffee and a little walk around the grounds of Araucana Lodge, my personal way of saying goodbye and thank you to a place that will stay in my heart forever. After breakfast, we all loaded onto the bus and drove to the airport. Saying goodbye to new friends is always hard. Saying goodbye to Marc and Eliana is especially hard, so let's say instead "Hasta luego". It won't be my last trip with them, as a matter of fact I will be back in 8 months to explore another area of Colombia.



## COLOMBIA | AFTERTHOUGHTS

♪ The people of Colombia are very friendly. They always smile at you as they pass you on the street. They are genuinely happy you are visiting their country and want you to enjoy it.

♪ Salsa dancing is hard! Why does it have to be so fast?

♪ At 74, I always wonder if I will be able to keep up. I never felt rushed

and was always given an opportunity to rest if I needed it.

✦ I was impressed by the large painted murals of birds at Doña Dora, La Florida and the Araucana Lodge.

✦ Colombian food is delicious. We had soup with every meal except breakfast and it was always good. There was often salad with fresh vegetables and lots of fresh fruit at breakfast.

✦ The roads are well maintained and the city is clean.

✦ In the end, I was able to add 81 life birds to my list but I enjoyed every bird I saw.



**KNOW**

**MORE**

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF THE BIRDS, FLORA, AND FAUNA SEEN DURING THIS TRIP, PLEASE VISIT:

eBird & iNaturalist Trip Reports -

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/171964>

<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/birding-by-bus-cali-colombia>