

## SPRING GETAWAYS

Don't let confusing weather stop you from enjoying March break with your kids, **T4**



# TRAVEL



SHEREEN MROUEH/G ADVENTURES

Postcard-perfect Cartagena boasts tiled roofs, medieval cobblestone streets and restored 300-year-old colonial buildings in shades of ochre and dusty rose.

## Colombia's changing face of tourism

Long associated with war and drugs, country becoming top hub for intrepid travellers

**VAWN HIMMELSBACH**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

COLOMBIA—I'm holding coca leaves in each hand, between my thumb and first two fingers. As instructed, I give thanks to Mother Earth and attempt to toss the leaves into the sacred lake (though they blow back and hit me in the face).

Standing here, in the jungles of Colombia's Sierra Nevada, it's hard to believe this slice of paradise was, until quite recently, one of the most brutally violent regions in the world — thanks in part to those coca leaves.

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is the highest coastal mountain range in the world, jutting straight out of the Caribbean Sea. The land is still inhabited by several indigenous tribes, though many of its current residents, such as Juan Sebastian Correa, fled to Bogota during the civil war. Correa, who is now 28, returned to Sierra Nevada five years ago and now runs an eco-tourism company, Sierra Ne-

vada Mágica, showing travellers like me his culture's traditions.

For Correa, the coca leaf is revered, not reviled. "The coca leaf is a plant that is very sacred in South America," he says. "It is a symbol of the Mother Earth and the symbol of female energy in nature."

In the Kogi tribe, for example, men chew coca leaves to get in touch with their feminine energy.

Most other people use coca leaves in their synthesized form: cocaine. And probably not to get in touch with their feminine energy.

Colombia is often associated with the three Cs: coffee, cocaine and civil war. (Or maybe four: cartels.) The country has a long-running history of internal conflict involving guerrilla and paramilitary groups with various acronyms like FARC, ELN and AUC. And it's still the top producer of cocaine in the world.

"The coca leaf is a plant that is very sacred in South America. It is a symbol of the Mother Earth and the symbol of female energy in nature."

**JUAN SEBASTIAN CORREA**  
ECO-TOURISM  
ENTREPRENEUR

COLOMBIA continued on T7

## One-of-a-kind vacation a life-changing trip

Remote Ontario reserve invites a group of Canadians to be immersed in oft-overlooked culture

**JENNIFER BAIN**  
TRAVEL EDITOR

Wanted: 25 intrepid travellers for Canada's most unique vacation.

The youth of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Innuwug First Nation (KI) are once again inviting people to experience life for a week on their remote, fly-in reserve in northwestern Ontario.

"When people travel, they don't just want to see new things, they want to be new themselves," says trip co-ordinator Andrée Cazabon, a Toronto filmmaker

with Productions Cazabon.

"They want to transform themselves through a trip. This is a life-changing trip — and it's also a lot of fun."

On the Reconciliation Trip itinerary: Truth-telling, active listening, bridge building (figuratively speaking), creating transformative relationships, fishing, swimming, games, community infrastructure visits, laughing.

You'll examine deep social issues, challenge stereotypes and racist attitudes, and explore reconciliation which, in a

Canadian context, "is about truth telling and about understanding our collective history together."

"Reconciliation is about righting the wrongs of the past that were done by Canada to indigenous people and creating a positive relationship together," Cazabon explains.

"It's also about understanding treaties and how we agreed to live in mutual respect."

FIRST NATION continued on T6



PRODUCTIONS CAZABON

Camille-Sophie, left, (here at age 12) has been coming to KI First Nation every year since the age of 7 with her mom, trip co-ordinator Andrée Cazabon.

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>> TRAVEL



PRODUCTIONS CAZABON

During a visit and feast with the community of Wapekeka First Nation, guests were presented caps.

> WHEN YOU GO

> The youth of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) invite 25 people to live on their remote, fly-in, northwestern Ontario reserve from July 14 to 21 for this year's reconciliation trip. The all-inclusive trip costs \$3,200 and includes flights to Thunder Bay and KI's Big Trout Lake Airport. Lodging is in the community. There will be visits to Wapekeka and Bearskin Lake First Nation. Many activities are planned and the goal is to build relations and mutual respect and share in stories, traditions, history and collective hopes for the future. Find out more at [reconciliationeducation.ca](http://reconciliationeducation.ca).

> Multimedia clips from this year's trip will be part of the Grade 10 truth and reconciliation unit this fall entitled *4 Seasons of Reconciliation* that's being piloted in 12 Ontario school boards and expanding to Alberta and Saskatchewan.



Organizers hope visitors will share their experiences, and help to "change our country."

# Opening visitors' eyes to changing country

FIRST NATION from T1

Canada has a lot to learn from Australia, she points out, which has an impressive reconciliation program to encourage unity and respect between aboriginal and non-indigenous people.

Cazabon has been working with the KI community for almost a decade and produced *3rd World Canada*. The 2010 documentary is about the aftermath of the suicide of three parents and the children they left behind.

Canadians think nothing of traveling to Africa, Asia or South America to build schools and orphanages, trek to poverty-stricken villages or take selfies with the locals.

But, as Cazabon ruefully notes, when we think about entering a reserve in our own country, questions of safety always come up.

"That was a big barrier," she acknowledges.

When the youth of KI decided they wanted to invite people to visit their isolated community of 1,300 residents, she agreed to be the co-ordinator as long as they took the lead.

The fear factor went both ways. Older community members wanted to protect the youth from the prospect of "having 25 Canadians stay in our homes, judge us and hate us."

The youth forged bravely ahead that first year, 2013, deciding if just one Canadian heeded their call, the trip would be a success.

The summer trip was a hit and now attracts an eclectic mix of travellers. Last year one family brought their 9 and 11-year-old kids.

It wasn't part of the reconciliation trip, but Sophie, Countess of Wessex, and Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne visited the reserve for two days in 2014 with a delegation of high-profile women.

This year, Toronto Mayor John Tory is considering coming, and the youth plan to ask Prime Minister

Justin Trudeau's wife, Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau, to join the trip.

"The fact that they can now write to the prime minister's wife shows they feel like this barrier between them and Canada is open now," says Cazabon, adding "it's the mix of leaders and ordinary Canadians sitting down and talking about reconciliation that helps us get to a place of change."

The youth leaders who run the trip are aged 8 to 29, but most are in their early teens. They put guests up in community homes, where running water, electricity, sewage systems and Internet aren't guaranteed, as well as the church, which has showers.

"It's an incredible act of generosity," points out Cazabon, "because nobody in the community has an extra bedroom and 200 people are wait-listed for housing."

Meals are served at the community grounds. There is a 10 p.m. curfew.

There will be campfires, stories, music and drumming, and visits to nearby Wapekeka First Nation and Bearskin Lake First Nation.

Guests will hang out at the beach and explore the boreal forest, listen, learn, laugh, share and have fun.

"We want them to see our living conditions and the hope we still have," KI youth leader Justin Beardy says in a news release.

This "expectation-free event" costs \$3,200 and is open to everyone.

Like any trip, Cazabon stresses, it's about "coming in friendship" and not about "doing something to the community or for the community."

The modest hope is that when the trip is over, people will share their "memories and good times" with their circles and help "change our country."

There may or may not be a trip next year. "For the community," says Cazabon, "it's about 'Do we have the stamina to do this again?'"

Grab this chance while you can. Jennifer Bain is the Star's travel editor.



PETER MOON



HARVEY SAINNAWAP



PRODUCTIONS CAZABON

A toddler in a customary *tikinagan* drinks from a bottle alongside "grandma," as the older woman is called by the community.

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