

# CENTURION

BON APPETIT, PARIS

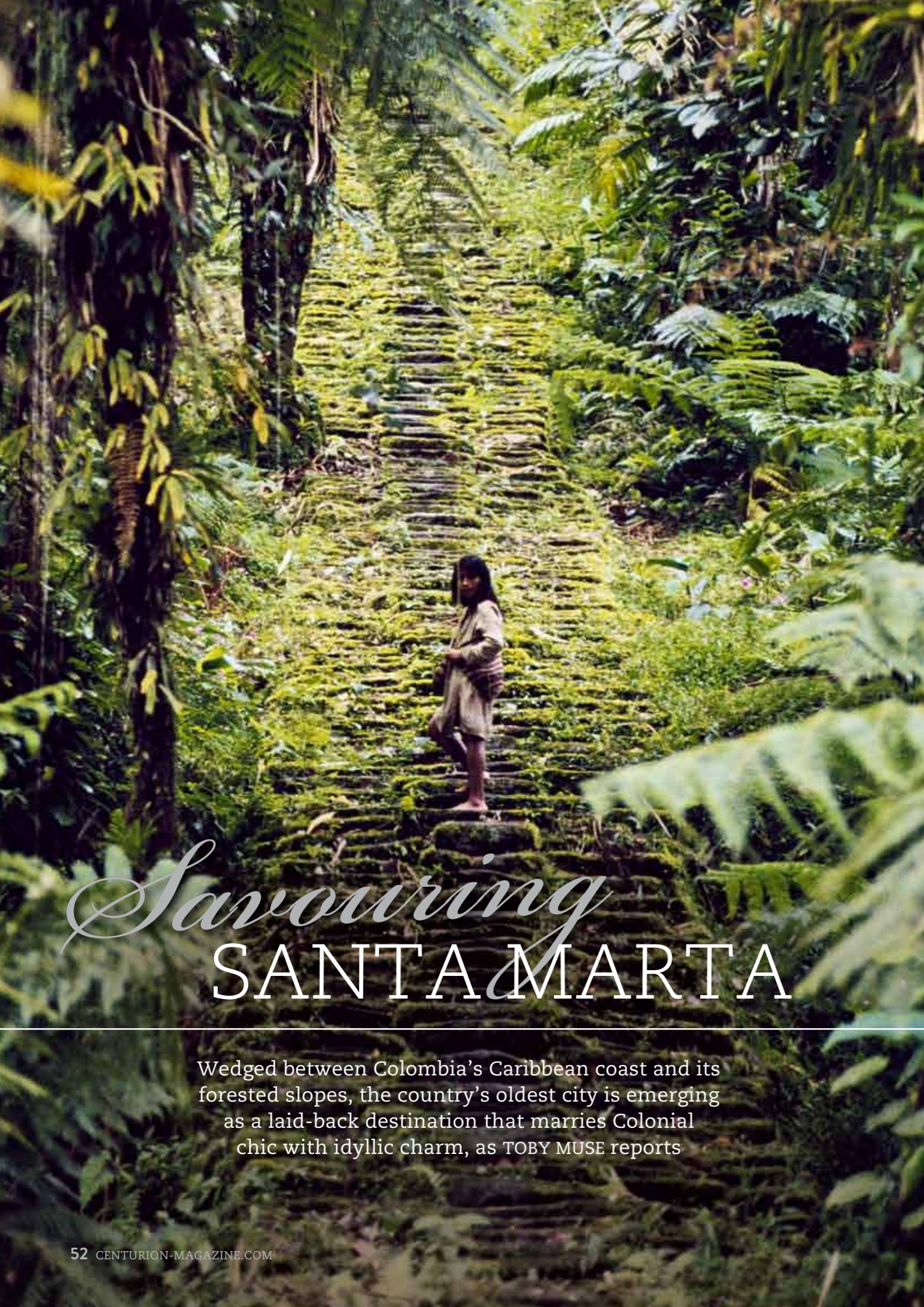
HOME IMPROVEMENT

THE CHANGING FACE OF VIENNA

DIAMOND CELEBRATION

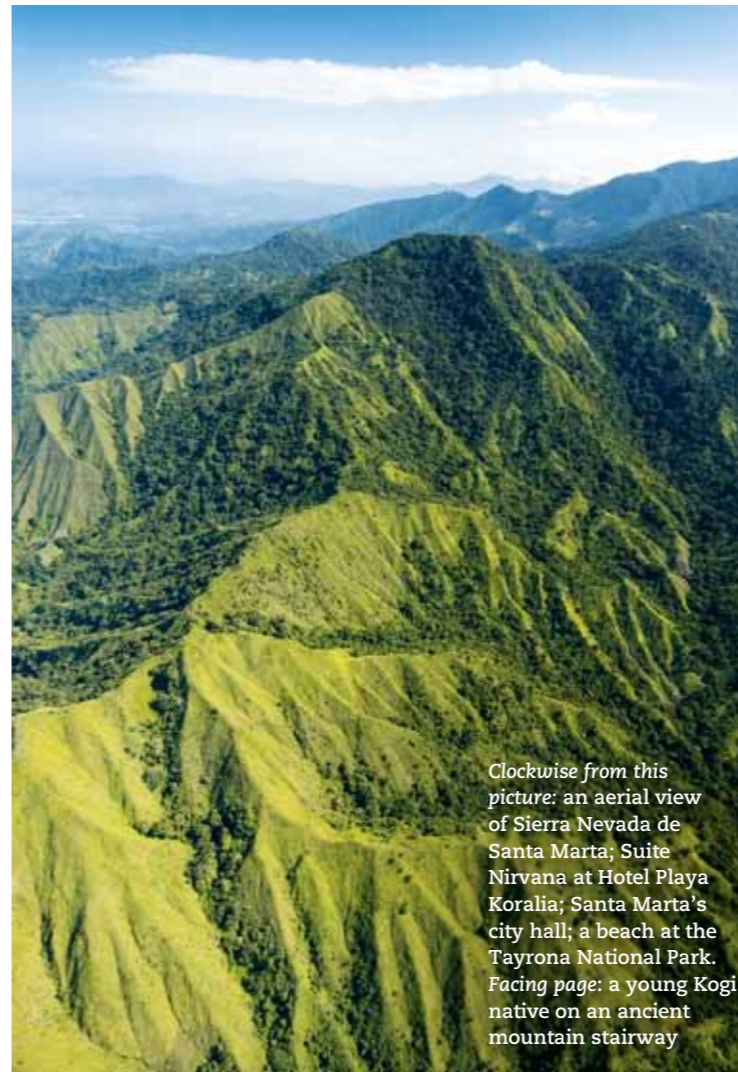
PALERMO'S TREASURES

AUTUMN 2012



# Savouring SANTA MARTA

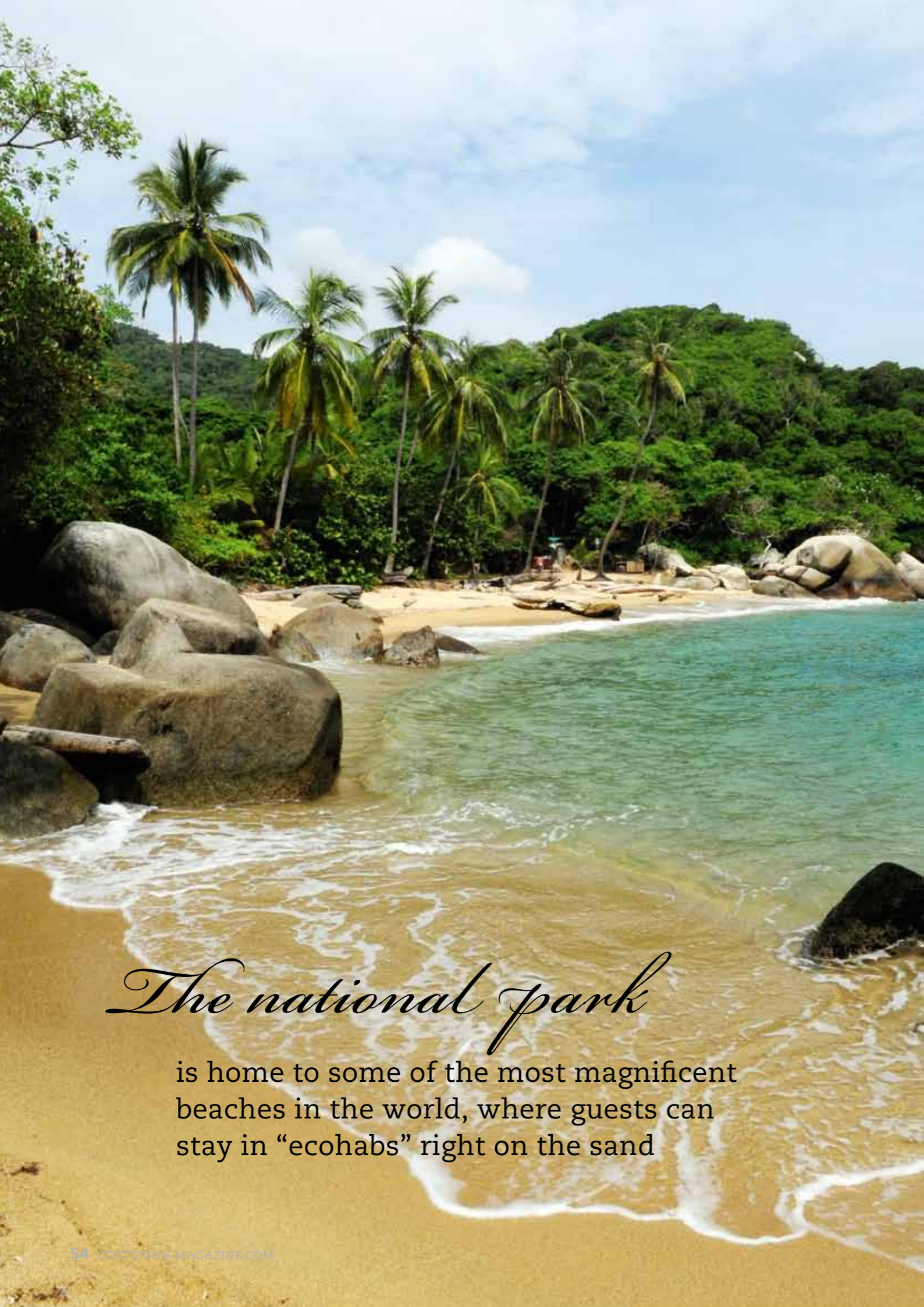
Wedged between Colombia's Caribbean coast and its forested slopes, the country's oldest city is emerging as a laid-back destination that marries Colonial chic with idyllic charm, as TOBY MUSE reports



Clockwise from this picture: an aerial view of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Suite Nirvana at Hotel Playa Koralia; Santa Marta's city hall; a beach at the Tayrona National Park. Facing page: a young Kogi native on an ancient mountain stairway



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FAUSTO GIACCONE/ANZENBERGER, ONDINA ROSCH, CHRISTIAN HEEB/LAIF, PEREIRA WONG/45EE/LAIF, PAGINA OPUESTA: FAUSTO GIACCONE/ANZENBERGER



## The national park

is home to some of the most magnificent beaches in the world, where guests can stay in “ecohabs” right on the sand

Every day at Santa Marta's seafont around 5:45pm, the same ritual takes place. In a hush, office workers, young couples and street vendors stand as if hypnotised by the setting sun, watching it slowly descend. When the sun finally dips beneath the watery horizon, the crowd seems to reawake, and continues on with the day.

*Cogela suave* (take it easy) is the motto of Santa Marta, a colonial city on Colombia's Caribbean coast, and as the rest of Colombia acknowledges, the Samarios (natives of Santa Marta) are kings of relaxation. “Samarios walk slowly; they take their time taking everything in. They're always calm, always relaxed,” said Simon Sanchez, a tourism consultant who runs Imap, a producer of visitors' guides for the city.

But Santa Marta is more than just another chilled-out paradise. Over the centuries, Santa Marta has perfected the art of Caribbean melange: old colonial houses look out onto modern buildings; easy days on the beach lead to jungle mountain hikes, even the population of Spanish; Afro-Colombians and Indigenous has been mixing for generations.

Founded in 1525 by the Spanish, Santa Marta is Colombia's oldest city and one of the first established in all of South America. Despite its head start, Santa Marta was overtaken by nearby Cartagena to become the tourism and cultural centre of the Caribbean coast. But now it is ready to step out of her sibling's shadow.

The authorities have woken up to the city's potential to attract tourism and started a massive multiyear programme

of renovating Santa Marta, in particular its colonial neighbourhood. “These splendid buildings were renovated about a hundred years ago, heavily influenced by European styles, such as Greek, Spanish and English,” said Jorge Laborde, a local architect. “They are typified by huge indoor patios, large windows and huge amounts of space inside.” And indeed the best way to see this is to stay in one of the old houses themselves, such as Casa de Isabella, a ten-room former home lovingly restored by local craftsmen.

In the city's bay, a new marina has been constructed that can house more than 250 vessels, perhaps the best spot to sip cocktails at sunset. But even amid the modern buildings, the city is at ease with its ever-present history. The native tribes remain a powerful cultural influence in Santa Marta. Visitors can pick up indigenous shoulder bags made by the Arhuacos. Hammocks made by Wayuu women (called *chinchorros*) are said to be some of the best handmade hammocks in the world.

The enthralling mix of cultures is also reflected in the local cuisine, especially the city's renowned rice and coconut dish, a must-try for any visitor. Among the top restaurants in the city are Burukuka, which caters to Santa Marta's elite who can be seen in their white cotton outfits, and Donde Chucho, which has been serving the city's top seafood for the past two decades. For those who want something even more relaxed, the nearby fishing town of Taganga is a short taxi ride away, and the lobsters served in a hut on the beach are unbeatable.

From top: Hotel Playa Koralia's thatched, open-plan dwellings, dotted among swaying palms; Colombian artist Erika Toledo's work in Suite Ondina at the eco-resort; a Kogi native surveys a coastal scene at the Tayrona National Park

Facing page: a secluded bay at Tayrona





Left: the Mexican-themed Suite Nagual, complete with hammock, at the Hotel Playa Koralia; below: ceviche de mar with fresh coconut milk plated with mango, plantain crisps at the hotel's restaurant

The more adventure-minded are advised to spend a week as Indiana Jones climbing La Ciudad Perdida, or the Lost City. More than a millennium old, the indigenous ruins are found in the jungles of the Sierra Nevada, the world's highest coastal mountain range. "We recommend this hike for people in a relatively good physical state," said Fernando Salas, who runs Expotur which heads tours up to the Lost City. It is also recommended that guests don't mind roughing it, as amenities are non-existent.

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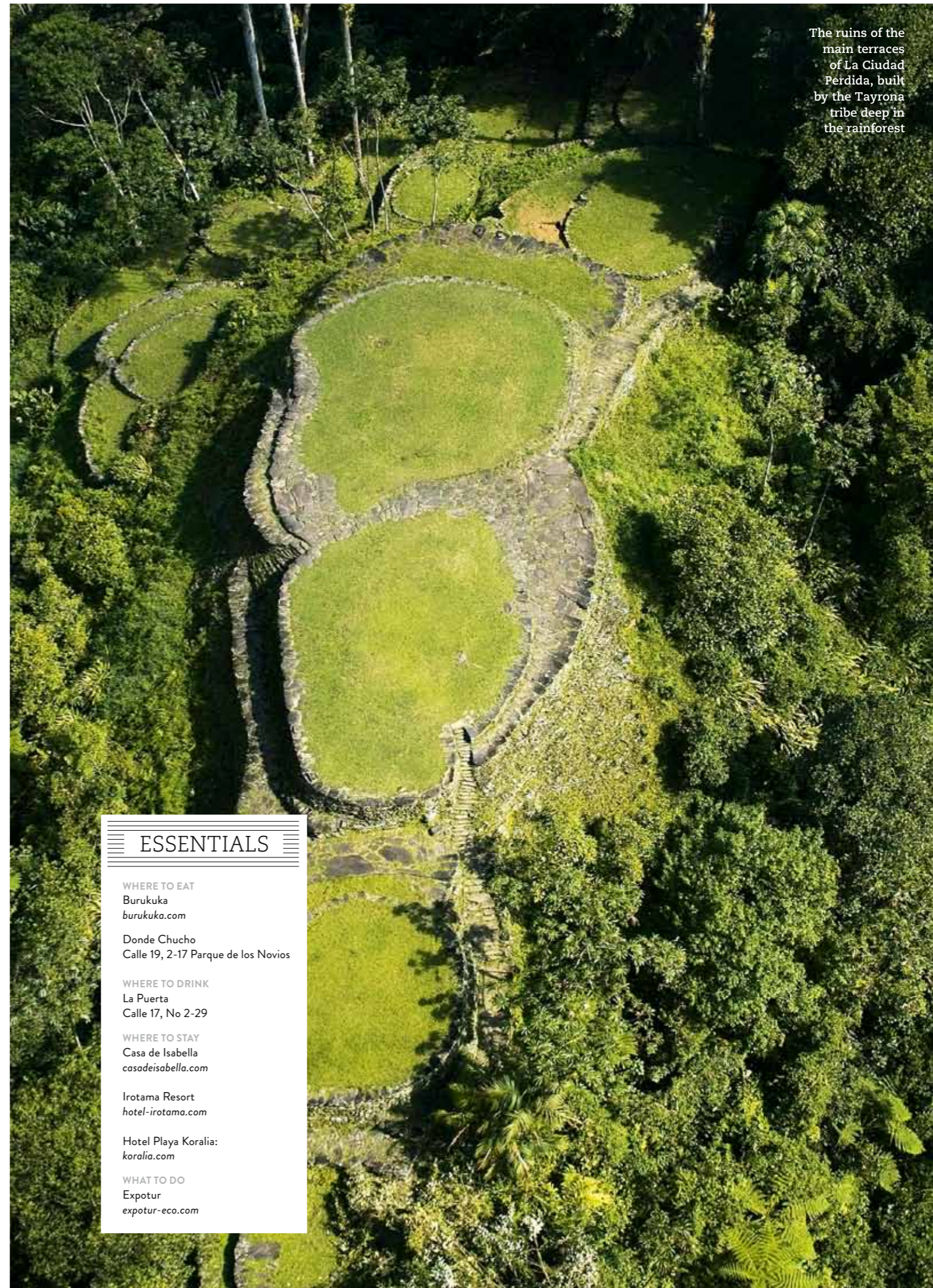
For post-prandials, La Puerta is a popular spot for Samarios and foreigners to meet, but the essence of a Santa Marta night out is a *vallenato* concert. Since starting on Colombia's Caribbean coast, the music has spread across Latin America. A rollicking evening, it's heavy on both accordion and whiskey.

But a necessary part of a visit to the city is full immersion in its spectacular surrounds. There's no better place to start than the Hotel Playa Koralia, set on the deserted beaches outside the city. As well as a spa, the hotel offers excursions to nearby waterfalls, lakes and rivers. Farther on is Tayrona National Park, home to some of the most magnificent beaches in the world, where guests can stay in "ecohabs" right on the sand.

The ruins themselves are what remain of a village built by the Tayrona tribe. After the tribe died out, the jungles swallowed the ruins. They were only rediscovered in the 1970s when grave robbers came out of the mountains loaded down with ancient artefacts. Beyond the dozens of terraces that mark where the houses once sat, upon reaching the Lost City, "You feel this powerful energy, you feel something but you don't know how to describe it," says Salas. It is an experience far beyond compare.

Coming down out of the mountains, the laid-back pace of Santa Marta offers well-deserved respite. The sunset is as beautiful as ever, but gazing at it there is the feeling of taking part in the ritual, rather than just observing. ■

PHOTOS: ONDINA ROSCH (2); OPPOSITE PAGE: FAUSTO GIACCONE/ANZENBERGER



The ruins of the main terraces of La Ciudad Perdida, built by the Tayrona tribe deep in the rainforest

### ESSENTIALS

WHERE TO EAT

Burukuka  
[burukuka.com](http://burukuka.com)

Donde Chucho

Calle 19, 2-17 Parque de los Novios

WHERE TO DRINK

La Puerta  
Calle 17, No 2-29

WHERE TO STAY

Casa de Isabella  
[casadeisabella.com](http://casadeisabella.com)

Irotama Resort  
[hotel-irotama.com](http://hotel-irotama.com)

Hotel Playa Koralia:  
[koralia.com](http://koralia.com)

WHAT TO DO

Expotur  
[expotur-eco.com](http://expotur-eco.com)