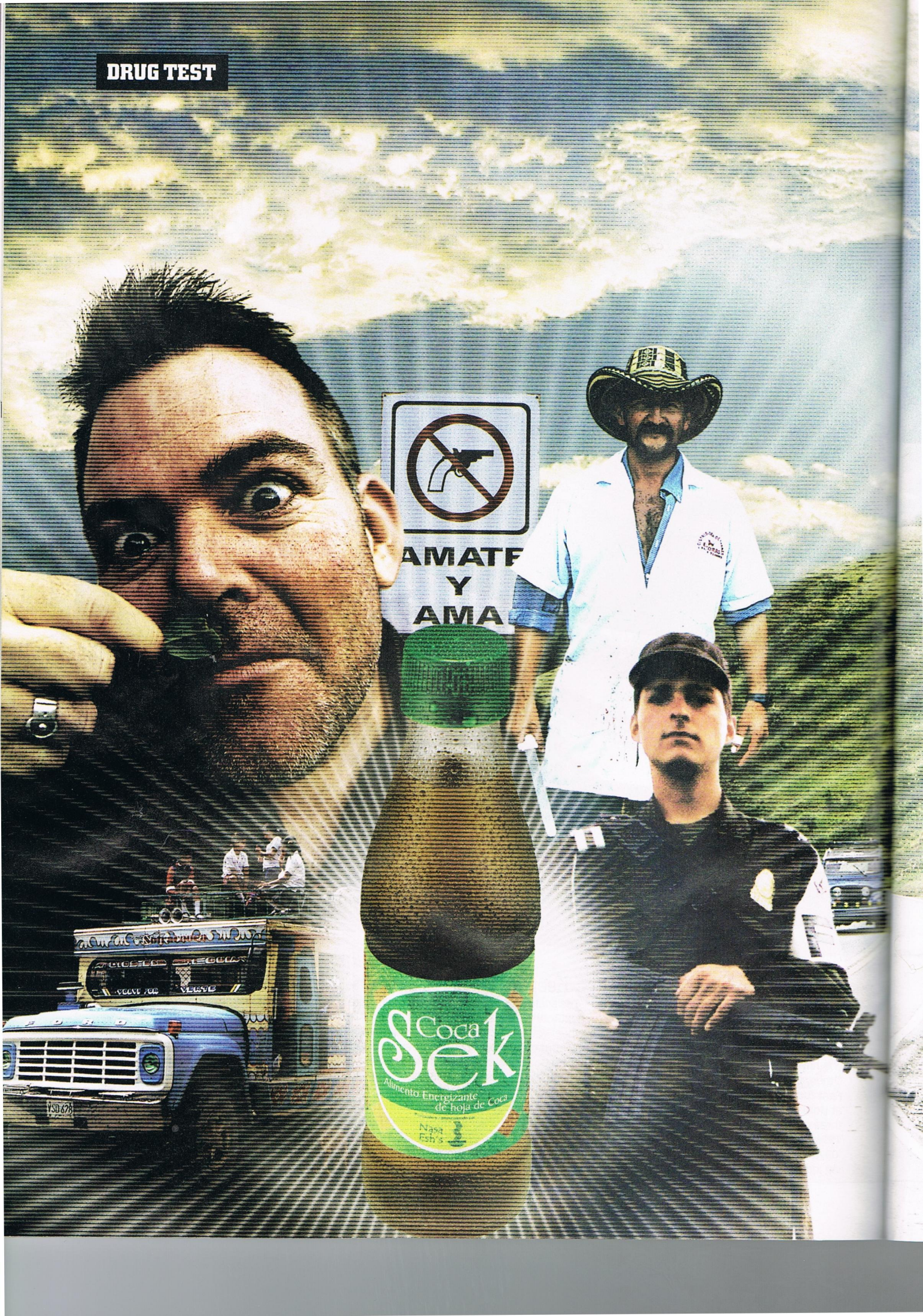
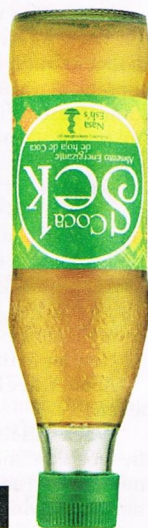


DRUG TEST





Colombian Gold



Two Maxim editors went to one of the most dangerous countries on the planet to find the soda war's new secret weapon. Now they're addicted.

By **Jason Kersten** Photographs by **Chuck Thompson**



We're just a few miles from rebel territory when we see an unremarkable white Toyota truck. We are told the truck has "distinctive security features," and that can only be a good thing, because it's going to take us deep into volatile turf that's controlled by Colombia's antigovernment FARC rebels.

"So tell me about these security features," I say to our guide, David Curtidor.

He points to a sticker on the door that reads EU and another on the windshield that reads I LOVE EUROPE.

"The guerrillas see the stickers and leave us alone," he explains. "They know not to bother the EU truck."

We were imagining bulletproof windows. Armor plating. Perhaps a machine-gun turret and a grenade or two. Instead, we climb in the truck to venture into some of the world's most dangerous countryside protected only by a sticker representing a group of countries with less muscle than a jellyfish. And why? To taste a soft drink.

A SODA TO DIE FOR

Rumors of this magical liquid surfaced last December, mixed in with the usual slew of man-bites-dog stories that come off the AP wire. "Colombian Indians Create Soda Made From Coca," the headline read. It might as well have been written in glorious red neon. The story explained that an indigenous tribe in the boondocks of Colombia was selling a soft drink made from the same plant as cocaine. Called Coca Sek, or "Coca of the Sun," the drink reputedly carried a kick that made Red Bull look like a whimpering, castrated steer.

"It's time to restock the office soda machine!" the boss barked through his megaphone. "I need two editors to go down there and find this stuff," he declared to the staff. "And smuggle some back while you're at it."

Was he insane? Didn't he understand that Colombia is a land of guerrillas and cocaine lords, not to mention the kid- [+]

DRUG TEST

napping capital of the world? Was he blind to the fact that Coca Sek is only available in the remote southwestern state of Cauca, a territory flush with FARC rebels and other indiscriminate right-wing paramilitaries?

At first no one wanted the assignment. But then Chuck Thompson, *Maxim's* token free radical, and I started talking. We'd heard about a different Colombia. The Colombia that spins tales of gringos dining on superb steaks and drinking all night with some of the most gorgeous women in the world—all for less than 20 bucks. Its wonders, we had heard, are open to anyone willing to take the kidnapping hype with a grain of salt or, in our case, a grain of cocaine. We got on a plane and headed south.

And up until we saw the "high-security" truck, we were feeling pretty confident about our quest for Coca Sek. We spent an uneventful night in Cali, one of the most crime-infested cities in the hemisphere, and took a 100-mile cab ride to the city of Popayán without having any caps popped into our pasty gringo asses. We even hooked up with Curtidor, Coca Sek's stoic spokesman, who seemed like a pretty competent guy. But then he showed us his truck—the Colombian equivalent of a rolling bull's-eye—and wanted us to drive through machine-gun-infested FARC-land.

"How far to the coca fields?" I ask him.

"About three hours. Don't worry, you'll be safe!"

"When was the last incident with the rebels around here?" I ask, and for a moment I am encouraged, because it takes him a little while to remember.

"Two weeks ago, in a nearby village," he says. "They executed two town council members. But don't worry, they don't mess with the Indians."

INDIAN COUNTRY

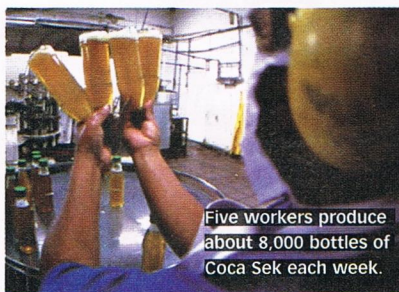
As we move deeper into the Andes, we pass checkpoints in the form of stone-faced kids with M-16s. For five hours we roll over mountain roads at an uncomfortable 20 mph, but finally we make it to the Nasa reservation.

"Any coca plants around here?" Curtidor asks some kids who are playing near a stucco shack. They point to the hillside behind the house, and a minute later we're inspecting a five-foot-high bush with bright green, tear-shaped leaves. It's a pretty harmless-looking plant, but millions have died for it, and the U.S. has spent billions of dollars trying to eradicate it.

Like many Andean natives, the Nasa have chewed these leaves for thousands of years, and the therapeutic properties are well-documented. Coca not only relieves fatigue but also has very high nutritional value. I pick some leaves from a branch, stuff them in my mouth, and begin chewing. They're extremely bitter.

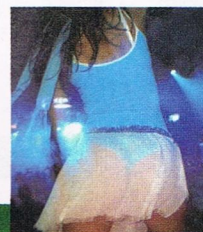
The Indians have made this stuff into a tea, or *maté*, for eons, and 120 years ago the Coca-Cola Company basically turned *maté*

It takes about 10 pounds of coca leaves to produce 100 bottles of Coca Sek.



Five workers produce about 8,000 bottles of Coca Sek each week.

'THIS IS PRETTY GOOD SHIT,' CHUCK SAYS AFTER A GULP OF COCA SEK.



into the original recipe for their famous soft drink. But by 1905, after America started getting strung out on blow, the company removed the coke from Coca-Cola. Which is a shame, because as we trek along dirt paths chewing more leaves, I feel content and not at all hungry despite a day of hard travel and nothing but a bowl of soup for lunch. "Let's move here!" I say to Chuck.

In the reservation town of Inzá, we meet Gelmis Chate, the mayor, who is keen on dispelling the myth that coca is harmful. "This is a new vision of a product that's had a bad name," he says. "In the indigenous communities, we never used the drug. We don't use coca negatively." He doesn't say it, but the rest of the thought is there: *We leave that to you decadent gringos.*

Still, to lower the temptation of a few Nasa going *Scarface* and making mountains of cocaine, all the coca plants used in Coca Sek are grown on family plots limited to 50 plants—about as much as it takes to produce a gram of yayo. Once the leaves have been harvested, they're trucked to a bottling plant in Popayán. It's there that we finally get our first taste of the drink we came 2,500 miles to sample.

INSIDE THE COCA FACTORY

Production is in full swing when we visit the bottling plant. Five workers wearing protective masks man a leaky 50-year-old electric-powered bottling machine that clanks and wheezes like an old steamboat. I immediately have to purge from my mind a scene from *New Jack City* where bare-breasted beauties in surgical masks

process crack cocaine in a Harlem lab.

"Do they work faster if they drink it?" I ask Curtidor.

"If they're tired, of course."

Brewing Coca Sek is pretty simple. Once the coca leaves are sanitized, they soak in cold water for about 20 minutes. The resulting extract is pumped into another tank, where flavoring is added. From there the extract flows through hoses into a bottling machine for carbonation and packaging.

Finally, Curtidor gives us the nod, and Chuck and I yank two bottles off the line and crack them open. The liquid is cold and sweet and has a mild citrus taste, similar to Snapple lemon iced tea. Beneath the flavoring is an earthy hint of the coca extract, the same "secret ingredient" in the original Coca-Cola.

"This is pretty good shit," Chuck says between gulps.

Each bottle of Coca Sek contains three milligrams of ecgonine, the key alkaloid that is cocaine's precursor. It's nowhere near the amount necessary to party all night. In terms of kick, it's comparable to a cup of coffee, and in our case we get the added psychological high of knowing we're drinking a substance that's controlled in the United States.

The Nasa have big plans for Coca Sek. "We're trying to get into the Cali market, but it's hard," says Curtidor. "There are big monopolies in Colombia, and it's tough getting shelf space."

And what if the Cali cartel tries to muscle in?

"Then we'll have to go to war," he jokes.

Buzz Kill

Here in America, we like our drugs one way: illegal. Here's how three of them got that way.

ECSTASY



1912 Merck Pharmaceuticals invents "E" but never sells it—likely to avoid the premature invention of techno music.

1953

The U.S. gives E to soldiers to test it as a truth serum. It doesn't work.



1972 While hippies suck down LSD, trendy Americans scarf delicious Ecstasy. A year later America becomes Discotown.

1985 The Feds place a ban on E. Good times are once again illegal.



2006 A 37-year-old man who has taken 40,000 disco biscuits reports that he now suffers from panic attacks, anxiety, and depression.

COKE



2500 B.C. Andeans chew coca leaves for nutritional purposes. Even without the Internet and Paris Hilton, life's not too bad.

1859 A German chemist puts coca into alcohol and sulfuric acid and shakes the resulting resin in baking soda. Hello, yayo!

1884 Siggie Freud extols the virtues of 'caine to friends. He soon becomes one of the drug's first abusers.



1915 The Harrison Narcotic Act is enacted, and cocaine is made to cost so much that no one can afford it.

1996 A report is released that says 79 percent of dollar bills contain traces of cocaine.



WEED



2737 B.C. People all over China keep "faking it" in order to get their doctors to prescribe a heaping helping of kind bud.

1776 The Declaration of Independence is drafted on hemp paper. Party on, James Madison!



1937 Congress passes the Marihuana Tax Act making legal possession of pot almost impossible.

1970 Congress makes the evil weed a controlled substance. You puff, puff, pass and you end up in the slammer.

2000 Afroman pens the line, "I was gonna make love to you, but then I got high./I was gonna eat yo pussy too, then I got high."

CALI'S OTHER NATURAL RESOURCE

Before leaving Popayán, we buy 12 bottles of Coca Sek for about 70 cents a pop. Later that evening, Chuck chugs four in two minutes as an experiment—and to set the mood for a night out in Cali.

"I feel *something*," he says, teary-eyed after the last bottle. He paces the hotel room and finds a map he thought he had lost. "It's the Coca Sek!" he surmises. Inspired, I slam two bottles, then we head out.

With 2.5 million people, Cali is Colombia's second-largest city. Carved into a valley between mountains to the east and west, it has the protected feel of Denver—but the picturesque setting can be deceptive. This is the home of one of the world's largest cocaine operations, the notorious Cali cartel, and it also claims one of the highest murder rates on the planet.

Unsurprisingly, locals are obsessed with security. When we enter our first bar on Avenida Sexta, the weapons check borders on sexual molestation. But it's worth it. Inside, the dance floor is pulsing.

We find a table and start drooling over the *chicas*. There isn't a single girl in the club—or the city, for that matter—who isn't wearing a skintight shirt, and nearly every one of them is nicely curved. But the thing we can't wrap our heads around is the frequency of fine booty. It's like the city has a patent on ass.

"I saw an ad today for an ass girdle," Chuck says, explaining that the contraption promises to

keep all of a woman's junk tucked snugly into her trunk. "Maybe they all wear it," he theorizes. We strain our eyes at the sea of gyrating bottoms in search of ass-girdle lines, but they all look smooth.

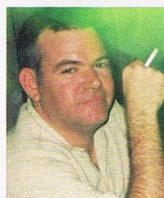
"It's gotta be all the dancing," I suggest. At the bar I spot a pretty blonde and a brunette whispering conspiratorially. When the brunette heads for the bathroom, I get up and ask the blonde to dance.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm not in the mood." I return to Chuck in flames. A few minutes later, after the brunette returns, Chuck erupts with laughter.

I look back to the bar, and the hotties are tongue-kissing. It's a slow, wet kiss, and I'm filled with bittersweet longing.

"Dude, you just hit on one of the hottest lesbians in Cali!" Chuck says.

Our Coca Sek buzz is wearing off a bit now, and we head out to the street where a bum offers us the real thing—a gram of coke, for five bucks. We don't have the heart to tell him that selling coke in Colombia is like selling water next to a river, and we're not thirsty. He reeks of liquor and can barely speak, and we don't intend on spending the night in a Cali cooler, so we gently decline and leave him staggering in the street.



NEAR THE BAR,
TWO HOTTIES ARE
TONGUE-KISSING.

After three more bars and plenty of guy-loving *mamacitas*, we finish the night at Praga, a disco on the north side of town. Pretty soon house music kicks in and a booty front moves in as girls start dancing on the speakers. As Chuck and I take it in, we start wishing we had a few more bottles of Coca Sek with us, and we begin to lament that we have to leave the next morning, because we know we've just scratched the surface of this country. And amazingly, we haven't seen a single American the whole night.

"They're all afraid to come here," our driver, Juan Carlos, tells us on the ride back to the hotel.

Instead of coffee the next morning, we drink two more Coca Sek. Then I stuff the last two bottles into my backpack. It's highly illegal and a huge risk to take, but we've decided that, in the name of keeping our jobs, we have to smuggle some of our new favorite brew back to the U.S.

When we get to Cali's Alfonso Bonilla Aragón Airport, it's a security fortress. My bag is X-rayed three times, hand-checked once, and sniffed by an angry-looking German shepherd. Either no one notices the Coca Sek or, more likely, they just don't care. Chuck and I stuff ourselves into our limb-folding airplane seats. Six hours later I try to look as inconspicuous as possible in front of the U.S. Customs agent. But then I realize that I'm half hoping he'll search my bag, find the bottles, and arrest me so I can become a Coca Sek martyr. But he doesn't.

"Have a nice day," he says instead, and waves me through. ☐