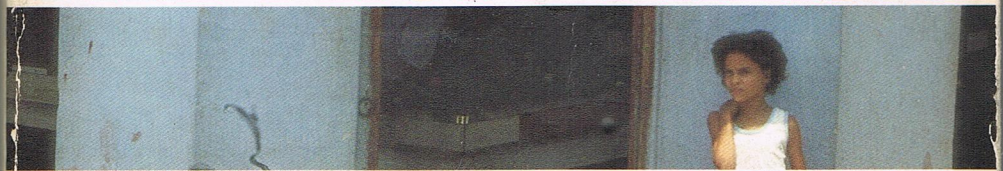




THE FRUIT PALACE



CHARLES NICHOLL

"One of the most absorbing travel books I have read.... Nicholl's adventures are as dashing as James Bond's. Brilliant, informative, well-written and fun to read."

— John Hemming, *The New York Times Book Review*

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR

"Compelling, imaginative, and altogether brilliant."—Jay McInerney

The Fruit Palace sells only juice. But it happens to be located in Santa Marta, the town that is to Colombia's cocaine trade what Lourdes is to holy water. It is also where Charles Nicholl got his first taste of the "white business" that occupies Colombians from street hustlers to cabinet ministers. And that taste launched Nicholl on a fanatical quest for "The Great Cocaine Story," which he relates with madcap energy and vividness in this classic travel book.

Charles Nicholl careens from shantytowns and waterfront barrios to steamy jungle villages and slaughterhouses. He survives fever, earthquake, and discovery by a dealer who threatens to "check his oil" with a knife. And he emerges with a tour de force that is a triumph of intrepid reporting and suspense.

"A traveler's tale of the highest order."—The New Yorker

"Sometimes comic, sometimes adventurous, always entertaining, The Fruit Palace is a terrific read."—Newsday

\$12.00

Cover design by Marc J. Cohen

Cover photography (Top): Barnaby Hall
(Lower): courtesy of the author



5 1 2 0 0 >

ISBN 0-679-74364-2

V I N T A G E D E P A R T U R E S

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword to the Vintage Edition</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	1
1 At the Fruit Palace	3
2 A Night with Captain Cocaine	11
3 The Assignment	25
4 The Flying Scotsman	32
5 Welcome to the Crow's Nest	42
6 Who's Who	54
7 Snow White	63
8 Rosalita	73
9 The Best Cook on Caracas Avenue	87
10 The Rapidero's Return	102
11 Tensa Valley	111
12 Rikki Sings	121
13 One <i>Arroba</i> over the Top	134
14 Medellín	145
15 Into the Chocó	160
16 The Shit Creek Special	168
17 <i>Terremoto!</i>	180
18 Back at the Fruit Palace	194
19 Chilean Packages	202

20	Waldino Can Get It	214
21	Sea Breeze Farm	228
22	A Friend in Riohacha	243
23	Bad Moves	256
24	Pick-up at Wharf Three	267
25	Indian Country	281
26	Nebusimague	291
27	Sierra Medicine	300
	<i>Author's Note</i>	308

*Approximate currency exchange rates at the time of the author's trip to
Colombia in 1983:*

U.S. \$1.00 = 60 pesos

1,000 pesos = U.S. \$16.00

FOREWORD

to the Vintage Edition

It is now ten years since I wrote *The Fruit Palace*. As an account of the Colombian cocaine business, it is past history: the tonnages seem tame, the prices are wrong, the *capos* of the day mostly dead or behind bars. I have made no effort to update those aspects of "straight" journalism in this book. But most of *The Fruit Palace* is another kind of book entirely—crooked journalism?—which continues to be relevant, I hope, for the traveller to Colombia today.

The Fruit Palace is also past history in a more personal sense, a book that belongs to another time in my life. And, as is the way with one's past life, I am slightly alarmed by the book. At the time I was living through the events narrated here, I thought: You must be crazy to be doing this. Now I tend to think: You must be crazy to be telling everybody about it. The book is candid in a first-person-singular form that I don't think I would attempt now. It is about someone behaving in a decidedly daft, frequently illegal, and sometimes downright sordid manner, and that someone appears to be me.

As the reader will learn, this book was, in itself, something of a nostalgia piece. I was not just journeying through Colombia on a particular assignment, I was also returning to Colombia: thus the telescope extends back another decade.

The heart of the book lies over twenty years back, in my first goggle-eyed encounter with South America, my first gulp of Andean monoxide in Bogotá, my first immersion in the indolent

charms of Santa Marta. I was twenty-three years old, on my first visit to what we used to call the Third World. I fell in love with Colombia—or, as a columnist in *El Espectador* used to call it, “Locombia”. Samuel Beckett once described his short stories as “bottled climates”. I claim no kinship with Beckett in style or stature, but hope that in the uncorking of this book the reader will recover something of the savour of Colombia, the grace of its people, the disreputable poetry of the side streets.

There were dangers involved in getting this story, lines to be crossed. But in certain parts of the country, criminality was the norm, the daily landscape. A writer was by no means welcome, but he was much less of a threat than one might think. (I did not, of course, work on this principle at the time.) No one was “exposed” in this book—all names are changed—though some people might feel they were used.

The true danger lies elsewhere. I have been back to South America since, I am drawn back, and I always have that same sense of its seductiveness. You could lose your moorings here, drift down the river like Rimbaud in his drunken boat, forget what you once knew and who you once were. In some hard-to-define psychological sense—though shading from time to time towards the actual—you could *disappear* here. This book is, in a sense, the chronicle of one such brief “disappearance”.

I suppose I should say a word about the drugs. The chief chemical constituent of the book is undoubtedly adrenaline, but there are others. Here, too, *The Fruit Palace* is essentially nostalgic, harking back to those earlier days when it was considered *de rigueur*—even culturally heroic—to smoke, sniff, or swallow more or less anything that got you high. This notion was already out of date when the book came out, deep in the era of Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No to Drugs” campaign. Traffickers—even those small-time operators I hung around with—had become Public Enemy # 1. I now have a seventeen-year-old son, and would prefer that he said “No”, certainly to the drug that features most prominently here. The book is perhaps too light-hearted about the “drug problem”, a bit of an old hippie caper, but anyone reading it as pro-drug propaganda, some kind of recommendation, needs his head examined.

The question people most commonly ask me about the book is

one that begins "Did you *really*. . .?" To which I answer that yes, I really met those people; and yes, I really visited those places; and yes, those smugglers at Finca las Brisas really did have two boats, one for fishing, which was called *El Problema*, and one for running drugs, which was called *La Solución*. But I also remind them that if someone turns up at the end of a four-month cocaine jag in Colombia and starts babbling out their "story", you might think yourself a fool if you believed every word they told you.

All journeys are like a dream: you snap awake at the end, wild-eyed and dusty, and try to carry the memory of it into your life, into your book.

—Charles Nicholl
Spring 1994



At the Fruit Palace

If these things have a beginning I suppose this began at the Fruit Palace, some twelve years ago now. The Fruit Palace was a small, whitewashed café, much like thousands of others in Colombia. It stood a couple of blocks up from the waterfront in Santa Marta, a hot, scruffy sea-port on the northern coast. The wooden sign outside read, 'EL PALACIO DE LAS FRUTAS, Cafetería Refresquería Residencias', the letters painted in bright, naïve colours, with a small study in fruit – oranges, mangoes, a half-sliced pineapple – in the bottom corner. The speciality of the house was the *jugo*, or tropical fruit juice, but you could also get the usual range of cheap meals, liquor, provisions, and of course the ubiquitous *tinto*, the small cup of black coffee that fuels the nation.

The Fruit Palace was always open and never crowded. People drifted in off the street, to trade a bit of gossip and rest from the weight of the sun. In the evenings a few dock-workers might come in for a game of *veinti-una*, with much shouting and slapping down of cards and tossing back of rum. I think Julio, who owned and ran the Fruit Palace, actually preferred business slow. He had dreams of getting rich, he had complex schemes for getting rich, but they were quite divorced from his day-to-day life. Whisking *jugos* was something to do while he waited for the big one to turn up. 'With a little bit of sweet and a little bit of sour,' he said, 'a man is happy.'

His favourite getting-rich dream at that time was focused, though none too clearly, on selling insurance. Ever since he

had heard of the Sistema No Claims Bonus, he had been sure that this was his true niche. 'It's marvellous,' he said. 'It's like I sell you a five-peso *jugo*, and then I say: If you don't drink it, I'll only charge you four.'

Julio was in his mid-thirties, but he looked older. He was not a Samario, as the natives of Santa Marta are known, but one of the town's floating population. Santa Marta is a honey-trap for hopeful prospectors from the interior, drawn by the promise of the good life by the Caribbean Sea, and of the rich pickings to be had from the town's various forms of contraband, mainly – but by no means exclusively – drugs. Julio was from Boyacá, 500 miles south in the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes. With his black stubble, bad teeth, sideburns and faded check shirts, he had the typical look of the Colombian *criollo*, the mixed Spanish-Indian type that forms the majority of the country's people. But he had something else – a certain finesse, a dapperness of manner and philosophy. His pointed nose and thick, slightly twirled moustache gave him an oddly *belle époque* air, a minor French dandy somehow adrift down a South American back-street.

Julio's contribution to Santa Marta's black economy was a little modest dealing in emeralds. His father had been an *esmeraldero*, first an emerald miner at Coscuez and then a small-time dealer. Some people have a way with animals: Julio had a way with emeralds. He always had a small consignment on the go, and whenever a new gringo face turned up at the Fruit Palace, it was not long before the talk was steered round to the fabulous virtues of the Colombian gem emerald, *la más famosa en el mundo*. Out would come the little fold of tissue paper, with a pair of Muzo stones or a thimbleful of uncut *canutillos* winking inside. He would rock a stone gently in his palm, like a tiny dice. '*Mire, mire, el fuego verde!*' Look at the green fire in it. His prices were always good, even by black market standards. I wondered if he sometimes sold fakes – he certainly spoke expertly about counterfeiting: rock candy, vanadium, doublets and triplets, and so on – but it wouldn't have done to ask him.

Also living at the Fruit Palace was a girl called Miriam, who did the cooking and the cleaning. Julio had a wife and a little daughter, but they were somewhere else for a while – the vagueness was Julio's – and in the meantime he was sharing

his bed with Miriam. She was a plump, moody Caquetana girl in her twenties. She wore tight skirts and a man's wrist-watch. As she worked she rendered current hit songs in a tuneless, hissing kind of whistle – her favourite was a tear-jerker entitled '*Volver Volver Volver*'. She was no great beauty, but like Lily in the song she had that certain flash every time she smiled. She flirted slyly with all the gringos. She visited me in my dreams, her breasts syncopating softly as they did when she danced to the songs on the radio. The quiet glint of machismo in Julio's eye was enough to keep it at that.

There was a small back room behind the café which Julio rented out – this was the *residencias* advertised on the sign outside. I had stumbled into the café one day for a beer, straight off the train from Barrancabermeja, a fifteen-hour haul across the Magdalena plains. The room was vacant. Too tired to look for a hotel, I took it for the night. The profound nonchalance of Santa Marta stole over me, and I was still there three months later. The bed had once belonged to Julio's grandmother and had a carved cedarwood headboard of which he was very proud, but it was bone-hard to lie on, and after a while I slept in the hammock out in the yard. When the tiny rent Julio charged for the room grew too onerous, I actually rented the hammock off him for something like 10 pesos a night. I kept my belongings in a large, rusty parrot-cage, procured by Julio for this purpose. I shared the yard with a small contingent of animals. Down at the end by the kitchen lived the hen, immured by night in its miniature shack of old fruit boxes. There was a guard dog pacing on the neighbour's roof, there were rats beneath the concrete walkway, and there was the cockroach – one of many, but definitely *the* cockroach, sleek and fat and shiny brown as a conker.

Julio was delighted with this new arrangement. It had the magic smack of something for nothing. I paid less, he got more, the back room now being free for other gringos – or possibly even *gringitas* – to fill. There were always gringos in town, North Americans mostly, also French Canadians, Italians, the occasional Brit. The better class of tourist stayed at the sea-front hotels, or out at Rodadero, the modern hotel development hidden round the headland. They certainly didn't stay down on 10th Street, where the Fruit Palace stood. This was really the last of the 'safe' streets. After that you were on

your own, in the shanty-town *barrio* of San Martín which sprawled up the dusty hills above the docks. Only the more dubious, low-rent travellers, or those who had special reasons for being near the docks, sought their lodgings here. In those days there were plenty who fell into one or both of those categories, and Julio's back room was seldom vacant for long.

When I think now of the Fruit Palace I remember especially the sweet-scented nights. Julio always bought his fruit over-ripe. This was both cheaper and better for making *jugos*, yet another instance of those secret financial harmonies he loved to observe. The musk of sweating tropical fruit pervaded the café. By day it had to compete with the oily aromas of Miriam's cuisine, but at night, swaying in my hammock in the yard, the sweet smell of corruption lay over me like a blanket.

The nights were filled with noises, accordions duelling down in the dockside bars, dogs barking across the low roofs, trucks gunning their engines ready for the long haul south. The dockland seemed to buzz right around the yard walls, delicious and dangerous, a faint periphery of menace like in the nights of childhood. Even in the dead of night, after all the jacks were in their boxes and even the animals were asleep, I would sometimes be woken by a strange concert of groans and squeaks. It was the sound of the sea wind swinging the wooden signboards of the cafés and flophouses down 10th Street. That sudden north-easterly wind, rising off the Caribbean after hours or sometimes days of stillness, was called 'La Loca', the madwoman.

* * *

It was at the Fruit Palace that I had my first taste of the Colombian drug trade. Illegal drugs were, and still are, the economic and cultural heartbeat of Santa Marta. In the early 1970s, when I was there, this still primarily meant marijuana. Marijuana – known locally as *baretta*, *marimba* or *mota* – was local produce. The fertile lower slopes of the Sierra Nevada, lying to the south-east of the town, produced hundreds of tons of grass a year. Nowadays it is thousands of tons. Fiercely hot, plentifully watered, full of hidden cul-de-sac valleys, and mostly impassable to any vehicle larger than a mule, the *macizo* is ideal marijuana territory. Colombian grass is considered by

many connoisseurs to be the finest in the world, and nine times out of ten this means one of the Sierra Nevada strains – Santa Marta Gold, Blue Sky Blonde, Red Dot, etc. These are pale, tan-coloured grasses, instantly distinguishable from the darker, moister, greenish-black strains – Mango Viche, La Negra – grown in the south of Colombia. A handful of flowering tops of Santa Marta Gold, *muños de oro*, looks like an exotic kind of rough-cut blond tobacco. The general rule is, the paler the gold, the stronger the grass. The palest weed is grown at the lowest range of the optimum growing altitude, around 500 metres above sea level, where the sun is hottest (any lower and the humidity saps the vital resins in the plant). The drug-lore further has it that these lower plantations run a greater risk of being discovered, and that the potency of the *marimba* derives from the daring and panache of the *marimbero*, the marijuana planter. Probably most potent of all is Punto Rojo, or Red Dot, so-called for its tiny splashes of red on the gold buds. The legendary Panama Red is the same strain from a neighbouring country.

In those days the vast marijuana market in the United States was mainly supplied by Mexican grass. It wasn't until the later 1970s, after a massive US herbicide campaign had wiped out many Mexican plantations – and what didn't get destroyed quickly lost its market value as smokers started turning up in casualty wards with Paraquat poisoning – that Colombian marijuana reigned supreme. The profits were big, but they weren't yet in the mega-buck units they talk in nowadays. And so the resourceful Samario *contrabandista* was becoming increasingly involved in another illicit chemical: cocaine.

Santa Marta's involvement in the cocaine trade is a simple and vital matter of geography. The town stands precisely placed between the major producers and the major consumers of cocaine, between the *cocales* of Peru and Bolivia where the coca plant is intensively cultivated, and the United States where the refined end-product is snorted up by the truckload. There are plenty of side-doors along the way, but the basic route, then and now, is for the drug to be funnelled up north across the mainland as far as it can go, to the Caribbean coast of Colombia, and from there to be shipped or flown to the United States and Europe. In the phrase of a former president

of Colombia, Santa Marta is 'a victim of its privileged geographic position'.

These were still the early days of the great cocaine boom. In America and Europe coke was the chic new chemical toy, the rock star's tippie, Ziggy's Stardust. Down in Colombia the big smuggling syndicates were just beginning to emerge and the two main *contrabandista* syndicates in Santa Marta – the Cárdenas and Valdeblanquez clans – were already battling for control of this hugely lucrative new market. But there was still plenty of room for independent operations, for the local cowboys and the gringo casuals and the small-time dealers. The Colombian press carried regular reports of some gringo caught at customs with a false heel full of flake. For every one who got pulled there were nine who got through.

So, what with the dope and the coke, this part of the Colombian coast, and three towns in particular – the industrial port city of Barranquilla to the west, Santa Marta in the middle, and Riohacha out on the Guajira peninsula – were fast becoming one of the world centres for drug smuggling. In Santa Marta everyone one met, whether gringo, Samario or drifting prospector, seemed to have a finger in the pie, some form of rake-off from some form of drug deal. There was even a missionary who discovered that the sacks of maize flour that the *campesino* farmers gave him to truck down to town were actually stuffed full of Punto Rojo grass. He came to an amicable agreement, whereby a portion of the profits was donated to the mission. In Santa Marta even God gets cut in on the deal.

The town had the feel of a tropical smugglers' den. It was a rakish, seedy, avaricious little place, but somehow exhilarating in the way it lived according to its own laws. The whole thing felt like a game. It was hard to imagine Santa Marta as the world centre for anything. But often at night, lying in my hammock, I would hear the sound of freight trucks back-firing, and I would hold my breath because sometimes there followed a kind of shock-wave, a pattern of silence and shouts, that meant it was gunfire.

A few of the gringos who stayed at the Fruit Palace were putting together small deals of some sort. The coolest of these was Nancy. She was a swan-necked girl from Toronto, who always wore sunglasses. She had me fooled all the way. She

was s
Colu
callec
figuri
buria
stock

Na
even
exqui
like a
to Ca
with l
deligh
town.

A f
Palace
the n
CON
LET
dutifu

to go,
'Is t

'Shu

I to
in the
interer
ment
The n
It was
but I l
Marta
for a d

I wa
used n
use gu
is the

Tha
either.
and pr
did see
I st

was supposedly on the coast to buy and export some pre-Columbian gold pieces. She spent a lot of time with a big man called Luis, who seemed to have a bottomless supply of golden figurines and pendants, no doubt illegally looted from Tairona burial sites in the Sierra. This is another of Santa Marta's stocks-in-trade.

Nancy came and went a lot, but she kept the room paid up even when she wasn't there. Julio was transfixed by her. This exquisite *gringita*, paying twenty-eight days in advance, was like a holy vision to him. One day Nancy said she was going to Cartagena on business, would I perhaps like to meet up with her there in a week or so? My mouth dropped open with delight. She was a beautiful girl, and Cartagena was a beautiful town. Of course I'd like to meet up with her.

A few days later a telegram arrived for me at the Fruit Palace. It was from Nancy. Through a veil of misprints the message read, 'PLEASE FIND OUT PRICE AND CONDITION OF LUIS'S GOLD FROGS DISCREETLY LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU COME ROOM 32'. I dutifully sought out Luis. 'Tell her I've got ten frogs, ready to go,' he said. He named a price per frog.

'Is that in pesos or dollars?'

'She'll know.'

I took the bus to Cartagena, tingling with hopes of romance in the old white city. When I got there she seemed more interested in Luis's figures than in me, and to my disappointment she left the hotel early that evening and didn't return. The next I saw of her was two weeks later at the Fruit Palace. It was only then that she told me. I never learned the details, but I learned that the gold 'frogs' had really been kilos of Santa Marta Gold, and that I had unwittingly couriered information for a drug-run out of Cartagena, now successfully completed.

I was aghast. How could she use me like that? *Why* had she used me like that? She shrugged. 'Timing. Security. I often use guys like you, places like this. It's like they say - innocence is the best cover.'

Thanks a bunch, Nancy. Her name wasn't really Nancy, either. She had another name in a hotel down on the sea-front, and probably a third name in Cartagena. I don't think I ever did see her without her sunglasses on.

I still have the telegram she sent me, a souvenir of

something, I don't quite know what. You would think I might have learned my lesson, but just a few weeks later I found myself mixed up in yet another drug move. It was cocaine this time, where the stakes are higher, the people crazier, and the comebacks nastier. From this night of folly I have no souvenirs, except the occasional flashback when my nerves are bad.

It was
back ro
tourists
brief ra
made f
Pan-A
Saturd
squatte
As I
already
town,
the tall
front c
select o
The
white t
condicio
night o
Bruno
an old
licks s
consist
an ener
soaked
black i