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# CULTURE AND TOURISM: AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE ROOTS OF A PEOPLE

On the Pacific coast of southwestern Colombia lies San Andrés de Tumaco, known as “the pearl of the Pacific”. This warm, picturesque area is home to a unique gastronomy, an Afro-descendant population, and a cultural richness that gave birth to marimba music, whose traditional dances were declared an ‘Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ by the United Nations’ Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization (UNESCO) in 2015. Tumaco, and other municipalities on the Pacific coast, treasure ancestral storytelling and customs. Tourists, drawn in by the territory’s music, dance, cuisine and other cultural practices that keep the ancestral heritage alive, describe the area as “magical.”

Given Tumaco’s potential for tourism and tourism’s potential to accelerate its social and economic development, CDLO and *Marimbea* have been working since 2020 to strengthen the communities’ capacities to provide tourism services, integrating the region’s fascinating culture and natural charm. The Marimbea project promotes alternative sources of income, knowledge exchanges and support networks for musicians, dancers and cooks and other traditional connoisseurs in the southern Colombian Pacific.

» Tumaco is a perfect destination to enjoy the sea, sand and sunshine while also learning from local masters of traditional music, dance and gastronomy.

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*What we do with Marimbea is build a bridge between the communities of the South Pacific and the rest of the world while bringing them an economic contribution and recognition”, explains Adrián Sabogal, the organization’s Founder and Executive Director.*

Marimba is based on the synergy between music, community tourism and innovation. It has become an initiative that, hand in hand with local cultural and social leaders, has co-created cultural and sustainable tourism experiences that:

- » Highlight the South Pacific's culture.
- » Preserve its cultural heritage.
- » Strengthen the ecosystem of the growing cultural and artistic industry of the southern Colombian Pacific.
- » Generate local economic development opportunities.

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*It is important to us, because we share the knowledge that our ancestors have left us so that our music goes from generation to generation and is highly recognized across the planet,”*  
says Jairo Ortiz excitedly, a traditional musician from the municipality of Guapi.

Marimba has understood the tourism market, global consumption trends and ‘conscious travelers’<sup>1</sup> demands. In turn it has created products that connect the territory with Colombian and international tourists, who are eager for unique experiences. These experiences respect and share the territory's history, values and identity, and have been created through fair alliances that generate income for the community.

*“For me it has been a reminder of how fun and rewarding it is to do something in community and to be part of a whole in which everyone contributes to something bigger,”*  
says Simon Broughton, Editor-in-Chief of Songlines magazine, about his experience at the Marimba Retreat in Tumaco.

Adrián has been passionate about the Pacific for more than 15 years, and in 2015 he finally decided to bring the Pacific to the city of Bogotá through traditional music workshops, which little by little incorporated more and more regional and Afro cultural elements. Marimba's growth came to a halt in 2020, however, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marimba's team and the communities they work with quickly adapted and took advantage of the region's beautiful locations, inspiring stories and local enthusiasm to and create a virtual experience in four municipalities:



» Marimba connects different cultures through art, history, identity and music. Juan Carlos Mindinero teaching Simon Broughton how to play marimba

Timbiquí, Barbacoas, Guapi and, of course, Tumaco. [Vibra Pacifico](#) or ‘Pacific Vibe’ guides the tourist to enjoy and learn about music, dance, gastronomy, fishing, crafts and about the ‘tenth cimarrona’<sup>2</sup>, at the hand of a local teacher.

Creating and recording the pedagogical and audiovisual material that made up this remote tour of the Pacific required long, exhausting and repetitive days, yet the leaders' maintained a charisma, spontaneity, and energy that showcased the area's rhythms and the aesthetic that captivated its spectators.

1. Conscious travelers are people who travel with the purpose of positively impacting the communities they visit.  
2. Afro communities' oral tradition that consists of poems composed of ten verse stanzas.



interest in other cultural products and services from the region, and 100% in visiting it.

At a time when the world felt so alone, CDLO supported Marimbea to overcome confinement and extreme isolation and brought people closer through traditions using *Vibra Pacífico* as a window to the region, promoting its products and cultural tourism services. Marimbea also organized three virtual conversations and participated as a guest in another five to promote the initiative with people from Japan, Spain, Colombia and Brazil.

Thanks to this academic project, it established alliances with international organizations, including a programs and services exchange platform, Teach to Learn; an online learning program, World Music Method; an international organization, In place of War; and the Japanese record label, Okra. The voices of the Cantoras de Yerbabuena have delighted Okra since they recorded at *Vibra Pacífico* and in alliance with Marimbea, the label will release a pressed vinyl in Tokyo of the singers recorded in Tumaco this year, increasing their audience in the international market.

Once the travel restrictions were lifted, Marimbea resumed in-person experiences and has since taken tourists from Colombia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, Sweden, Spain and Brazil to discover Tumaco. CDLO has financed the design and implementation of these cultural and community tourism retreats, from which the communities have received roughly US\$17,500 in income.

The richness of this experience, both virtual and in-person, has been recognized not only by its participants, but has been featured on the front page and in several articles in a leading Colombian newspaper [El Espectador](#), and in different mass and specialized media, including the blog/podcast, [Caja de Resonancia](#) of *El Tiempo* newspaper and in *Caracol News*' [Show Caracol](#). Other outlets have devoted extensive lines to it such as British magazines [Sounds and Colours](#), [Rhythm Passport](#) and [Songlines Magazine](#).



» Victor Rosero is one of the cultural leaders of Barbaecos who spent hours in front of the camera recording the *Vibra Pacífico* courses

Marimbea has not gone unnoticed by government institutions, as winners of the *ProColombia* contest. ProColombia is the government entity in charge of promoting Colombian exports, international tourism and investment in Colombia. The Colombian Ministry of Culture invited Marimbea to be part of the Colombian delegation at Womex 2021, a cultural market in Portugal. Although it has only been slightly over one year since Marimbea formally became a travel agency after obtaining the national tourism registry in November 2022, the firm was a finalist for

the ProColombia Tourism Awards that recognize the best tourism initiatives among different categories.

During November 2022, Marimbea toured the United Kingdom and Austria with Juan Carlos Mindinero '*Cankita*', a marimbero from the *Bejuco* group, to represent the musical joy of the Pearl of the Pacific. This tour of workshops, concerts and cultural shows brought all the rhythm and knowledge of Tumaco to London, Manchester and Vienna, to places as prestigious as the University of Manchester, SOAS University, the private studio of famous producer, Brian Enno, and emblematic places for Latin music in Europe, including Hootananny Brixton in London and *Fania Live* in Vienna.

Less than two months later, Marimbea was recognized for the first time with the award, [Spirit of Folk](#), from Folk Alliance International, an American NGO dedicated to preserving and promoting the tradition of folk music in the world.

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*Following the recognition, Marimbea’s director noted, “This award is very important for Colombia, because it enhances our country’s recognition as a cultural powerhouse and positions us in the global music market. Winning this award is a milestone for Colombia and its culture since it shows that we are, above all else, a cultural, natural and life power”.*



» Left: Ledys Caravajal and Carmen Benté are the guides to virtually visit Timbiquí by cooking with all the flavors of the Colombian Pacific coast



» Right: The guides of the Marimbea experience are local people who live their and celebrate their culture

The award ceremony, organized by [Folk Alliance International](#), was in February during one of the most important business roundtables for folklore, which has been held in Kansas annually since 1989.

With CDLO’s support, Marimbea has trained 43 people and nine cultural organizations in cultural tourism experiences design in the municipalities of Guapi, Tumaco, Timbiquí and Barbacoas. Over the last year and a half, local organizations have received roughly US\$30,250 in income, of which US\$20,500 have come from the sale of Marimbea Kits, in-person experiences and donations managed by Marimbea. The remaining US\$9,750 correspond to Vibra

Pacífico registrations, whose all profits are returned to the participating communities.

Through Marimbea, cultural leaders and local groups such as *Fundación Tumac*, *Bejuco*, *Asociación de Mujeres de María del Mar* and *Semblanzas del Río Guapi* have joined the tourism value chain, promoting economic and social development, presenting their region, and enhancing their identity—not only for their benefit, but for all of those who are fortunate enough to experience the “magic”.

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