

The Legend of Kajuyalí

During the past fifteen years, I have had opportunities to visit camps in eight countries. Although many of the camps did not fit the model of what we might expect in the United States, in every case, I found that there were more similarities than differences. The concept we call summer camp might be known in other countries as outdoor education, children's rest, holiday camp, vacation plans, or group work, but, regardless of what it's called, I found there was a high level of professionalism and a genuine dedication to providing a safe and productive outdoor experience for children.

While the camp industry in some countries is relatively new and directors are in the

process of establishing camping associations, professional education, and best practices, others have histories and traditions that match that of American camps. Since 1987, members of the International Camping Fellowship have facilitated, counseled, and supported camp directors as they have formed associations in Australia, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Russia, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. The Asian Camping Fellowship and the European Camping Fellowship are currently organizing, and both have planned conferences during 2004.

In many countries, directors have addressed issues and overcome obstacles that would stymie the most experienced American directors. Beginning in this issue of *Camping Magazine*,

we will profile some of those camps and learn about the challenges that are facing our colleagues in other countries. In this issue, we profile Kajuyalí Camp — where the owner/director has moved his camp repeatedly in order to escape the threats of guerrilla warfare

and drug traffickers in Colombia and Ecuador. In the next five issues, we will visit camps located in the forests of Siberia, in a jungle in Malaysia, in a castle in Ireland, on the steppes of Mongolia, on the South Sea of Australia, in the mountains of Japan — concluding the series at a camp located in a 15th century hacienda in Mexico — just in time for the International Camping Congress in October 2005, in Mexico City.





And the Legend Begins . . .

The night sounds are amplified by the Colombian jungle as the campfire blazes brightly. The adults are dressed in white, and the children are uncharacteristically silent — their eyes focused on the camp director. The new campers have been anticipating this ceremony in which they will hear the legend of Kajuyali and learn whether they have been chosen by the stars to be initiated into the Kaju or the Yali tribes. The director begins:

Kajuyali was born in the Indian village of the Achaguas, led by their chief, Kamunitzali. For many years, the village was terrorized by giant animals which destroyed the crops and frightened the villagers. Groups of warriors were dispatched to fight the enemy forces, but most were massacred by the giant animals. In desperation, Kamunitzali offered marriage to his beautiful daughter, Tzamani, to anyone who could bring him the ear of one of the giants. Kajuyali, who was only fourteen years old, wanted to join the warriors, but he was told that he was too young. One day he and his little dog Chumany went to the pond to hunt for small animals called lapa. While there, he made a tea of some of the pond plants, but discovered that they were poison when poor Chumany died after drinking the tea. Grieving for his pet, Kajuyali had an idea. The next morning he left in his canoe with a supply of the poison tea to hunt the giant animals. When he encountered the giants, he was attacked and lost a leg, but he managed

to swim into the lake and mix the poison tea in the lake water. The giant animals followed him and began drinking the lake water. All of the animals died, and he returned to the village as a hero. He finally married Tzamani, and they lived a happy life with many children. Kajuyali's leg is represented by the Achaguas as Orion, the constellation.

At the conclusion of the legend, the new campers and staff are given their tribal designation, and then escorted by a member of the opposite tribe for a special initiation ceremony. The Kaju (heart) and Yali (blood) symbolize the spirit divided, but throughout the camp session — through games and competitions — the two teams will be joined as each camper is encouraged to give his strength and wisdom to his team. The camp staff are well trained to use the Kaju and Yali teams as a vehicle to teach good sportsmanship and the value of teamwork.

The 20th Century Journey of Kajuyali

Although the legend and the Kaju and Yali tribal contests have become an important part of the tradition of the Kajuyali programs in Colombia, to Juan Mario Gutierrez, the founder and director, they have also become a living metaphor for his journey during the past twelve years. Since the inception of Kajuyali in 1992 on a family farm as a small camp, called Kuita, for twenty-five children, the program has

endured the threats of the drug cartels, guerrilla violence, kidnapping, and natural disasters. With each new menace, the staff have responded by moving the program to a safer area or instituting new procedures.

Bombs, Drug Money, and Guerrilla Violence

After the explosion of a bomb in a nearby town, the January 1993 session was cancelled, and the Kuita program, which had quadrupled in size, was moved to another location. In 1994, the political situation took a dangerous turn during the Pablo Escobar drug war with ever-increasing violence in the country. Ironically, the drug money spurred a strong economy, and families had more money to invest in camp experiences for their children.

Camps in Latin America

- The Asociacion Mexicana de Campamentos (Mexican Camping Association) was established in 1996 and has seventeen member camps. Camp is a new industry in Mexico, and it is estimated that there are fifty camps in operation, primarily private residential.
- The Asociacion Venezolana de Campamentos (Venezuelan Camping Association) was formed in 1989 and has twenty-four camp members. There are approximately forty resident camps, serving 12,000 children, and fifty day camps serving 20,000 children.
- Asociacion Colombiana de Campos de Verano (Colombian Camping Association) began in 1998, but is undergoing reorganization after the difficult times of violence that caused many camps to close. Colombia has eight known camps with approximately 8,000 children attending day, resident, and school programs each year.

Under President Samper, installed in 1995 with the help of drug money, the country became anti-government, the economy began to decline, and the violence of the insurgents began to directly affect the camp families. Parents continued to prefer to have their children in camp rather than on the streets or the shopping malls — where bombs were exploding. In 1996, one of the Kajuyali sites had to be closed as the violence escalated in the Los Llanos area, and a new site was opened on the north coast of the Atlantic near the ancient Indian Cogi community. After experiencing destruction and vandalism of the previous camp facilities, cabins were constructed from heavy duty containers in order to transport them quickly if the area became too hazardous. The local Indians proved to be very friendly and generous in sharing their culture and folklore with the camp.

The two Colombian camps were under the constant watch of private security companies hired to patrol the camps' borders. At the end of the year, however, the guerrilla troops began to move into the jungle, and the Los Llanos area became ideal for their purposes. After one of the Kajuyali partners received a kidnapping threat, they were forced to leave their beloved Los Llanos.

Kajuyali Seeks Peace in Ecuador

One of the most violent years was 1998, and the difficult decision was made to move most of the camp operations to Ecuador. A rented site in a small hotel on the Pacific coast of Ecuador provided a peaceful, but temporary, haven for the campers and staff, — with twenty international participants for the first time. Unfortunately, the peace was not maintained, and Ecuador developed its own set of problems. An Indian strike which closed all of the roads into the camp for ten days forced the staff to arrange food purchases from local farmers. The imminent threat of explosion by the volcano Tungurahua, severe devaluation of the Ecuadorian currency, and a national political strike further complicated the camp operation. Juan Mario and his staff were discouraged but not defeated — they wanted to show the children that peace was coming and that Kajuyali, the warrior, was not hiding from the war but would help to bring about that peace.

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The New Winds of the New Millennium

In 2000, Kajuyalí left Ecuador and initiated a new program in Costa Rica. With the strong support of the Costa Rican Embassy in Colombia, campers from Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and the United States flocked to the new camp. A day camp program was opened in Bogotá in a country club. 2000 became known as “the new winds” — signifying the rebirth of Colombian camps — and the program further expanded to operate four camps: Costa Rica; Guatemala; Lagartos Day Camp in Bogotá; and Panaca, a joint project operated in a national park in the coffee plantation area of Colombia. As President Pastrana’s term neared conclu-

sion, guerrilla violence re-escalated, and staff received special emergency training, but the 2002 season ended safely and uneventfully.

Kajuyalí Slays the Giants

The optimism felt by the Colombian people under President Uribe’s administration, installed in 2003, has created a decidedly improved climate for camping and tourism. Kuita, the original camp, has reopened. The Costa Rican program, now called Shiwamba (“world of spirit” in Mayan), is operating at full capacity, along with Los Lagartos Day Camp and Mundo Aventura, a new day and resident camp program operated in partnership with a Bogotá amusement park for children of low-income families. The roads near the camps have improved and are considered much safer, and security

concerns have diminished during the past two years.

The Warriors Speak

Juan Mario Gutierrez gives credit to his family and the Boy Scout program for teaching him to love children and the outdoors — but his first experience as a camp counselor was at Camp Robin Hood in Maine. It was there that he learned about the business aspects of camp and the potential for applying his university degrees in industrial engineering and corporate organizations and communications to his love of camp.

The Kajuyalí staff is a very select group of young adults. New counselors are chosen after a three-day retreat in which a team of psychologists, former counselors, parents, and directors observe candidates in a variety of exercises and activities. Those selected participate in a seven-day course in adventure-based counseling, several short courses throughout the year, and an intensive precamp training. All programs have a medical doctor and a psychologist to provide support to the program.

Elisa Luque, Camilo Acero, and Mariana Gomez — all university students in their early twenties — have been campers and have worked for several years in the Kajuyalí programs. They readily share their admiration for Juan Mario and the confidence he has inspired in them to set a good example for the children of the camp. They have been a part of the many transitions of Kajuyalí — but their memories are of the lifelong friends they have made and the opportunities to help Colombian children appreciate the richness of their culture.

Sra. Hilda Laverde of Bogotá, mother of fifteen-year-old Silvia, speaks confidently about the Kajuyalí programs. Silvia has attended since the age of eight, and Sra. Laverde stresses that she has never been concerned about safety and security because of her trust in the directors and the staff. Silvia is an energetic, adventurous girl and enjoys every minute of her time at camp. Her mother feels that she has learned to be independent and has benefited from the values promoted by living together with the other children and adults at Kajuyalí. She is realistic about the dangers inherent in some of the rural areas of Colombia, but she knows that the camp locations are carefully researched and security precautions are in place before a camp opens. The staff has always been attentive to every detail and willing to answer all questions.

Kajuyalí Today

While many of the activities of Kajuyalí are similar to those of camps in the U.S., others such as “canopy” are distinctive to the South American jungle. With platforms constructed in the canopy of the rainforest to allow observation of the birds, flowers, and monkeys, campers enjoy flying from platform to platform. A survival course, Kamunitzali, is an experience to teach teenage campers to stretch their limits with the support of their team. Other activity options include salsa dancing, a PADI diving course, golf, horseback riding, and crafts indigenous to the area.

Shiwamba in Costa Rica, provides a Spanish immersion program for international children, and most staff are Spanish-English bilingual. Sailing field trips to the local islands, viewing volcanoes, and experiencing the exotic natural wonders enhance the program.

When asked what he sees as the major difference between Latin American and U.S. camps, Juan Mario explains that Latins have a special way of having fun and enjoying life. There is an energy that occurs in camp, and activities are full of fantasy. With a difficult history, Colombians have learned to appreciate the simple things in life. The staff stress the magical feeling of Kajuyalí that can’t fully be conveyed to those who have not experienced it.

Kajuyalí has provided a generation of Colombian children a means of understanding their culture — along with the confidence inspired by swimming in a lake and climbing mountains rather than hiding from the negative cultural influences. As the Kaju and the Yalí — the heart and the blood — are finally joined, the strength of the ancient warrior lives again. Kajuyalí, with the dedicated people who have created it, will continue to provide the magical experience for generations to come. ■

Photos: Courtesy of Kajuyalí Camps.

Linda Grier Pulliam is executive of the American Camping Association (ACA), Virginias, and was a camp director for twenty-seven years. She holds an M.S. Degree in Education, has served on the Steering Committee of the International Camping Fellowship for the past ten years, and is the international coordinator for ACA. She may be contacted at acavirginias@ACAcamps.org. The Web site for Kajuyalí Camp is www.kajuyali.com.

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International Camping Congress, 2005

“An amazing experience.” “Well worthwhile for the entire family.” “The trip of a lifetime.” “A conference like no other I’ve attended.” — all descriptions from past participants in an International Camping Congress. Previous Congresses have been held in:

- 1983 Toronto, Canada
- 1987 Washington, D.C. (sponsored by the American Camping Association)
- 1994 Toronto, Canada
- 1997 St. Petersburg, Russia
- 2000 Tokyo, Japan
- 2003 Melbourne, Australia

Preparations are now being made for the Seventh International Camping Congress in Mexico City, October 12-16, 2005. Under the theme of “Preserve the Treasures, Enrich Young Lives,” the event will be hosted by the Asociacion Mexicana de Campamentos, assisted by the Venezuelan Camping Association and the Colombian Camping Association, and co-sponsored by the International Camping Fellowship. The Congress will offer educational sessions, plenary session speakers, a fiesta, an evening at the National Museum of Anthropology, exhibits, and, most importantly, an opportunity to share experiences and ideas with camp professionals from six continents.

The Hotel Sheraton Historico will serve as the venue for the Congress, with accommodations available in hotels in various price ranges. As a first-time event, a full-day Counselors Workshop is scheduled for October 15 at Xochitla (place of flowers), a research and educational facility northwest of Mexico City. Xochitla, which hosts 60,000 children each year in environmental programs, is also a botanical garden, conference center, and park.

Preliminary information, including the fee schedule with adjusted rates for students, is found on the Web site, www.iccmexico2005.org. Questions may be directed to Linda Pulliam, lgpulliam@aol.com or 919-603-0317.