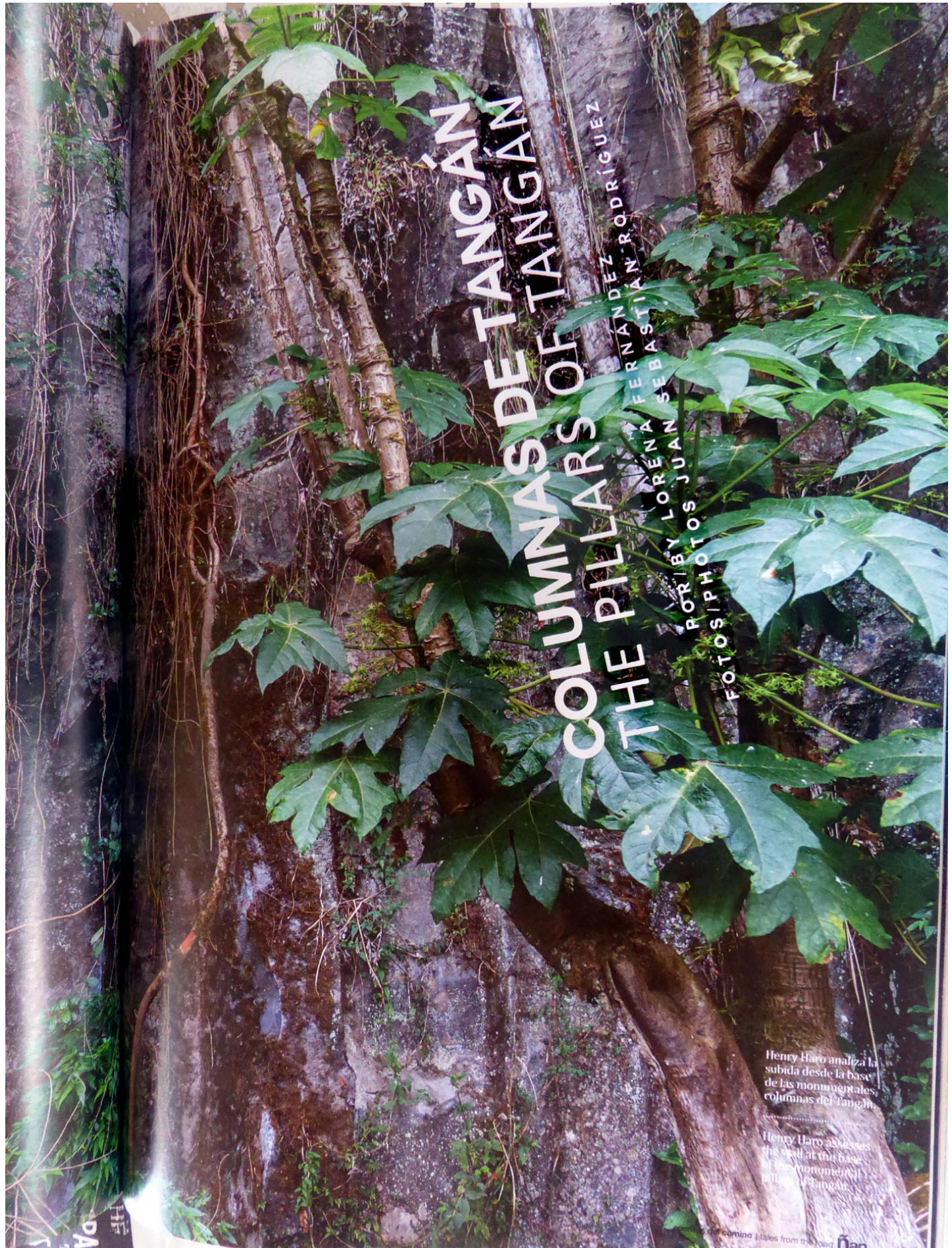


WRITING SAMPLE

Published in the 23rd edition (December, 2016) of the travel magazine *Ñan*. Both Spanish and English versions of this story were written by Lorena Fernández. Page 1 of 2.

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STEVE LOZANO'S HEART FLIPPED. PERCHED SOME 50 FEET ABOVE THE GROUND, WITH THE TIPS OF HIS CLIMBING SHOES SCRAPING THE ROCKS, HIS FINGERS STRAINING BETWEEN THE CRACKS, HE HEARD VOICES BELOW. HIS GREATEST FEAR HAD MATERIALIZED: THE OWNER OF THIS PARADISE HAD COME TO SPEAK WITH HIM, AND WASN'T BEST PLEASED.

He was going to need a translator. Lozano's Spanish was not good enough to explain why he had dared to trespass the dense vegetation, make it down the gorge, to see – and, well, climb – the incredible natural structure that for weeks had been obsessing him, which had already acquired the moniker “The Pillars of Tangán”.

From afar, the site looks like a huge jungle waterfall. Instead of water, however, this gray curtain is comprised of enormous vertical rocks, perfectly uniform, one on top of another, like Incan stonework lining the ravine. It is a natural formation, although many have wondered about its archaeological value. It wasn't until an internet video about it was shared among rock climbers, that its sporting value took off.

That day, another climber was also “opening routes” with Lozano, seeking to invent imaginary paths along the stone wall: Felipe Proaño. He has since made a name for himself in the world of rock climbing by publishing a guide to several key spots in the Ecuadorian Andes. His enthusiasm for Tangán today is that of someone who witnessed a birth. Or even delivered it: he proudly served as interpreter between Lozano and the owner of this incredible place, Ramiro Uribe.

Don Ramiro had no idea what was happening, really. With his wife, he had left the property a decade before, in search of a better place to educate their two children, a complicated affair in a minuscule community like Cerro Azul, where there is only one elementary school for the entire area. He had bought the land from his brother-in-law, and little by little expanded, creating a formidable property, which includes several

hectares of primary forest, a waterfall, a river, and this great rock wall.

“I greeted them and said, ‘Do you know I am the owner of this place...’? I want to talk to you,” recalls Don Ramiro. The two strange men hanging from the mountain didn't look like your average trespassers. They quickly found that they shared the same values of respect for nature. In no time, a sort of partnership was born, which both parties, and the entire rock climbing community, benefits from to this day.

To get to Tangán, you take the road to Sigchos (heading west from the Panamericana at Saquisilí) and detour about 20 kilometers before the village, heading in the direction of the forest. Somewhere in between, in the middle of nowhere, a couple of switchbacks later (the road winds endlessly) and without notice, you have to know which “little house” tells you you've arrived. It marks the parking lot for visitors. It is not a place you arrive at without invitation – although that was how Lozano and his team made it here.

Damaris Jaramillo joined a recent expedition to the place. She brought her sleeping bag, clothes, weekend supplies, and, of course, her climbing equipment. She, like other climbers, did not have to carry all her gear. The harness, anchoring ropes, helmet, and other heavy things were dealt with by Socio, a

donkey bought with the funds raised by Climbers of Ecuador, an organization run by Lozano and his wife. Jaramillo and her friends did not have to walk for an hour in the jungle, either. Now you can reach the camp that Don Ramiro built for the climbers thanks to the trails the pioneering climbers to this place opened, a much shorter and easier route than the original one.

By the time the caravan arrives, Don Ramiro and Socio are already waiting by the side of the road. “I help with everything visitors might need, and make a modest amount from what the climbers feel inclined to contribute,” explains Uribe, who after seeing his sons graduate from school, finally returned to his estate in 2014. Since then, he and his wife have dedicated themselves to rural life, and to welcoming the frequent visits from gaggles of excited climbers.

“The first time I came was the first time I had practiced traditional climbing,” says Jaramillo. At age 19, she has been climbing for a decade. It's only the third time she has visited Tangán. “Tangán is incredible,” she says with enthusiasm, “it is totally different from anything you can find in Ecuador, from the type of climbing to the fact that it is, and feels, so remote.”

Don Ramiro expects the climbers to keep coming. He hopes to raise funds to improve the camping site, perhaps even build a large cabin. Lozano and his friends also have plans to “develop”; although their plans are all up the rock. “It will take me at least seven years to set up all the routes,” says Lozano, with his eyes fixed on the prodigious architecture that nature forms in this very special corner of our Andes. ■

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