

# The Lost City of El Dorado

*Whereas the Aztecs, Inca, and Maya left great monuments, the Chibcha of what are now Colombia and Panama were best known for their expertise in fashioning jewelry and offerings from the gold and emeralds that were plentiful in their land. These items played an important role in Chibcha religious ceremonies. They created statues and other gold relics, which were then offered to their gods. The Lost City of El Dorado tells of one such ceremony and how it came to be.*

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A long time ago, shortly after the world was created, there was a lake called Guatavita Lake, located around the mountains of what is today Colombia. For many generations the Chibcha Indians lived near the lake. They believed a magic serpent lived at the lake's bottom. "She could be Bachué, our Mother," said one of the Chibchas. "Or she could be the devil. But whatever she is, whoever wakes her will be taken and never return." All the people of the village knew this. All except the princess. She was young and the only daughter of the King. He watched over her lovingly but was very protective. She had never left the area of the palace. The palace had many rooms in which she could play and a large garden in which she spent many days. But the princess wanted very much to see all the land of Guatavita.

One day, she snuck out of the palace and hiked to the mountain area. There, for the first time, she saw trees that grew luscious green leaves and thick twisted vines. She swam in streams that bubbled down the mountain with sweet cool water. From the vines she swung and when she grew tired she rested under the canopy of the leaves. The princess played all day. When the sun began to set she started to find her way home. Walking down the mountain the princess came across the largest lake she had ever seen. It was Lake Guatavita. "Is it from this large lake that the sweet waters run into the streams?" As she thought, the princess knelt at the edge of the lake. With her hands she reached and gathered water to taste. The waters of the lake moved a little. And then they moved a lot, for the princess had awoken the legendary serpent. The surface of the lake changed from calm to enormous waves churning back and forth, created by the serpent as she swam towards the surface. The princess first saw the serpent's curled back, then her long neck, and finally her head. The princess was not scared. The beauty of the serpent made her think it was friendly. Emeralds sparkled off the serpent's back and her eyes were cherry-colored rubies. "How beautiful you are," said the princess to the serpent. They both looked at each other for a moment and with that the serpent closed her eyes, slid back underneath the water, and returned to her slumber. All this made the princess late. By the time of her return the King was frantic. "Oh do not be worried," said the princess. "I have seen our lands, the green of the trees, the sweetness of the waters, and the lovely red eyes of the lake's serpent." With this news the King was alarmed. "My dear princess, the serpent belongs to another world, you cannot go to that lake again." The princess was sad but she listened to the King's words. She had no intention of going again. But that night, as the princess slept, the eyes of the serpent appeared in her dream. For the first time she heard its voice. "Come to me. Come to me at the water's edge." When morning came, the King realized the princess was missing and his heart sank. "The serpent cast a spell on the princess. She has left this world for that of the serpent's." The King ran to the lake. As he suspected. There lay the princess' robe. He thought he would never see her again. The sadness that came over the King was so great it drained all his power. This made the Chibchas worried. No land can last long without a strong

King. One of the Chibcha priests had an idea. "Because of the serpent the King has lost his power. Therefore it is only the serpent who can restore the King to as he once was. The priest hiked to the water's edge. There he lit a bright fire and danced and sang around the flames. It became very dark. The moon disappeared. Then the waters of Lake Guatavita started to move. Great waves curled up and rushed to the shore. And just as it seemed that the water would overflow the lake borders, the moon reappeared and the waters calmed. "The serpent has spoken," the priest told the King. "Your princess is alive and well in the serpent's world. You need not be sad, for when your reign has come to an end, you will join her in the world under Guatavita." This made the King feel strong again and he reigned for a long time. Each year, to thank the serpent and to insure her promise, the King and his people traveled to the water's edge. There the people painted the King in gold and adorned him with emeralds. Once this was done the King rowed a boat to the lake's deepest point. There he sang and slowly dropped the emeralds and other jewels into the lake. These were gifts for the serpent. When finished with all the jewels the King would dive into Lake Guatavita. His last offering, the gold on his body, slid off his skin toward the bottom of the lake, toward the world of the serpent and the princess. The King did this for many years until the year he dove, and it being his time, he joined the princess and the serpent. The reign of that King was so prosperous that all future kings made the same offering each year to the serpent of Guatavita. With time the world underneath the waters of Guatavita became painted in gold and paved with emeralds. The Chibchas came to call the place El Dorado. And though many have searched for it, none have found it. But the Chibcha know that it is there.