

# STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Bogotá



**Stories from the Heart of Colombia**  
A podcast by Procolombia

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Hello, and welcome to Stories from the Heart of Colombia, a podcast by Procolombia.

I'm Nick Perkins and I've been living in Colombia since 1999.

I love cycling, hiking and traveling to unusual places. For a long time, I'd been dreaming of visiting every Department in Colombia on one round trip, but I hadn't been able to do it until this year, when I was finally able to plan the trip of my dreams. A trip that would take me to each of Colombia's 32 Departments, plus its capital, Bogotá, to spend a day or two, exploring the magical geographies, witnessing their immense biodiversity and soaking up the majestic vistas, all while enveloping myself in the warmth of their peoples.

In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors and sounds I discover in this land of infinite horizons.

Colombia has something for everyone.

Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

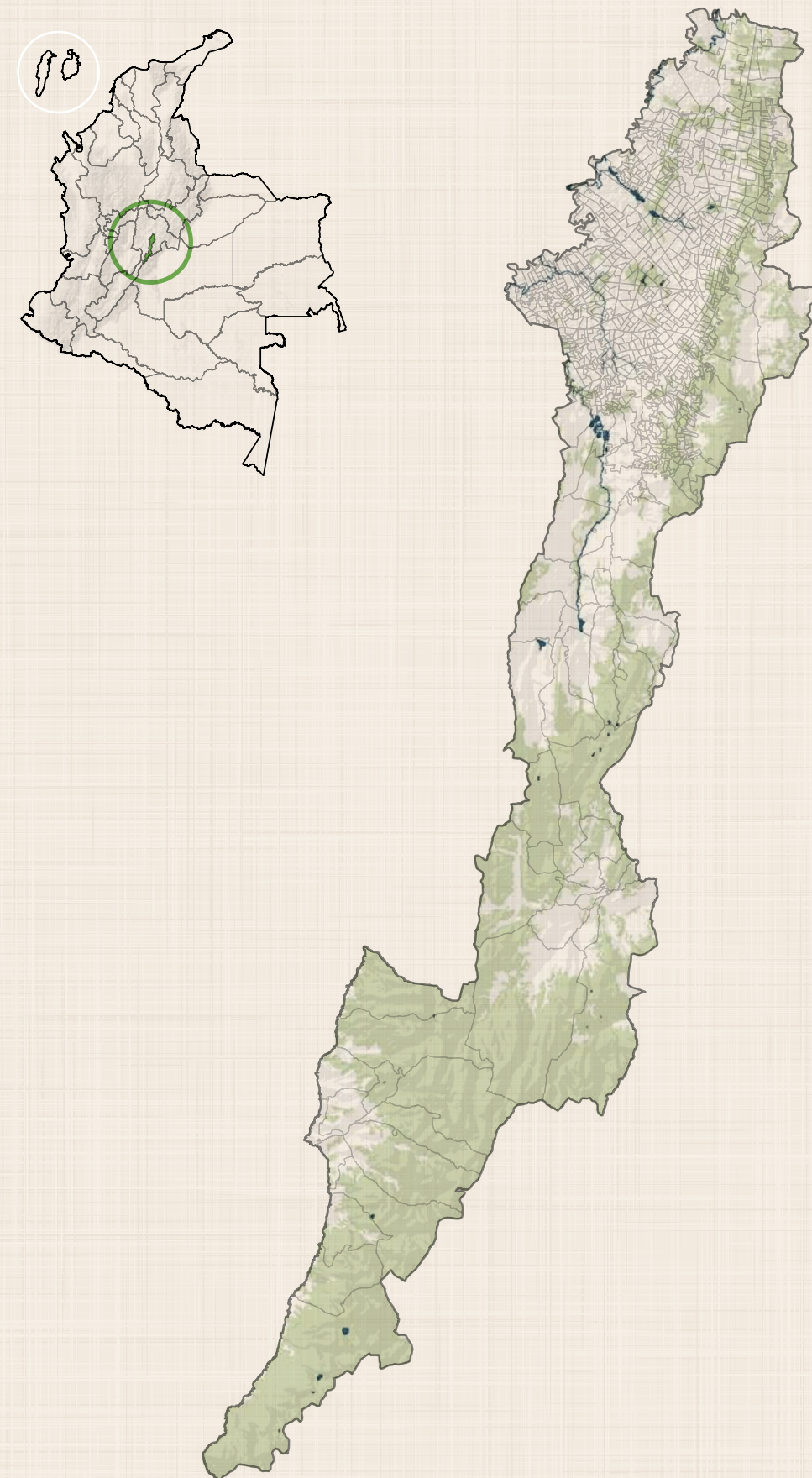
I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.



# Bogotá

Today's episode of the podcast is about Bogotá, Colombia's capital city. And although it's not actually a department, it's the Capital District. It doesn't belong to the surrounding departments of Cundinamarca, which is why it gets an episode of the podcast all to itself. And it was quite hard to decide where to visit in Bogotá for the podcast. Bogota's been my home since 1999. I know the city very well. I've worked all over the city. I've visited schools and universities in my work is a teacher trainer all over the city. I've cycled all over the city. City's full of amazing restaurants, art galleries, historical monuments and all sorts of other things that you would expect to find in a cosmopolitan capital city. After a long discussion with my production team, we settled on two places to visit. One is Paloquemao, which is Bogota's central market. It's a fascinating place to go, and you can see and buy, if you want, some of the amazing tropical flowers which grow in Colombia, and which are sold in the market. And also see and taste and buy some of the amazing tropical fruits which are growing all over Colombia, and can be found

in Paloquemao. And then I will be going to the neighborhood of Egipto. Egipto is an old historical working-class neighborhood. It sits in the mountains above the famous historical center of Bogotá, the Candelaria. And I chose Egipto rather than the Candelaria because there's a very interesting project up there, which is called Breaking Borders, and it's giving new employment opportunities to young people in the neighborhood. And as its name suggests, it's breaking borders. It's trying to break down the traditional stereotypes the people have about the neighborhood which we'll hear about later in this episode of the podcast. For now, I'm off to Paloquemao.





**María:** Yo soy Eugenia Montejo Vanegas...

So I've come to María Eugenia Montejo's stall, and María Eugenia tells me that she's from Bogotá, originally. And she's spent her entire life selling chilli, fresh chili, dried chili and chili sauces produced by her here in the plaza de Paloquemao. And she's invented all of her own recipes for the salsas, and sold them here in the plaza for the last fifty years, in her own business. So I asked Eugenia to tell me about how she and her mother arrived at Paloquemao, why they chose this particular market, and she said that it was her mom's decision, when she first came here with her mom. And her mom had had a stall at another market that was closing down. And she started to look around to see where to go next. And, so she was looking around and then someone told her there was a new market, that was just sort of opening up, and expanding. And it was called Paloquemao, in the center of Bogotá. So she came to have a look around, and decided to rent a stall here.

—¿Y en esa época vendían chiles, o esto vino después?

Eugenia's stall is famous for selling a wide variety of fresh and dry chilis which you can't find anywhere else in Paloquemao, and are actually difficult to find anywhere else in Bogotá. And I asked her if the business started with the sale of chilis, or if it was something else. And she said, "no." At the beginning they just had a boxed, standard fruit and vegetable stall in the market, selling typical potatoes, plantain and cassava as all the other stalls did. And she said at that time Paloquemao wasn't a particularly good place to have a market stall. She said not many people came to Paloquemao from the center of Bogotá, which is where most of the population in this area lived. The area where we are in now is quite industrial, full of warehouses. And at





that time, the 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue, which is one of the major Avenues in the center of Bogotá, was actually blocked by a building. And a decision was made to move the building. It's actually a really interesting story in the history of Bogotá. The foundations of the building were excavated and a type of rail was installed underneath the building. The building was then put on two wheels, which sat on the rails, and it was literally moved out of the way of 19th Avenue, and she said she can remember it. Eugenia actually went up to watch the building being moved and the whole spectacle... the whole of Bogotá turned out to watch this. Anyway, the point being, that once the building had been moved, 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue ran straight down from the center of Bogotá to Paloquemao and that was when people started to come more and more to the market. So I asked Eugenia again about the chillis themselves and how she hit on this idea that's supported her and her family for the last fifty years, and she said it basically came from a conversation she had with her mom, when her mom basically decided to retire. She was fed up of getting up at the crack of dawn and working in the cold of Bogotá, in the open market place. And she asked Eugenia if she would like to take over the stall, and Eugenia said, "yeah, of course, enjoy your retirement. I'll take care of the stall and I'll look after both of us." And she said she didn't sell that much chili at that time. She sold one or two varieties of chilli. She said chili was not a big part of Colombia's diet at that time. And she said you could only find one or two varieties from Colombia in the marketplace and definitely couldn't find anything from other countries. And she started making her own salsa preparations, which started to become more and more popular. But she said, where things really took off was when Bogotá's exhibition center, Corferias, as it's called, it's fairly nearby to where we are. And people would start coming to visit Paloquemao, to take a







break from the fairs that were going on at Corferias. And they started asking her about her chilis, and people had bought her salsa preparations, and they'd found this stall that was getting more and more popular in terms of chilis. So she started selling more, and then she said people started to actually look her up and started asking her to source different types of chili for them. And they'd ask her for Mexican chilis and she's saying, "oh no, I don't have any of those." And then they'd ask her for a Peruvian chili. And she'd say "I don't have any of those either," and that made her realize that there was a business opportunity here. And then she said, she'd realized that there were 20-30 people a day coming in asking her for different types of specialty chilis. She said, "right, this is it, this is a business that I have to get into." And she did. So I find it really interesting that María Eugenia's successful local business was actually inspired to a certain degree by tourists. Whether they were domestic tourists or international tourists coming to fairs and exhibitions at Corferias. It was the tourists who were coming in, finding this woman who sold chili. They were asking her for other types of chilis that then led her to creating a successful business. So I use that as a segway into asking her about tourism in Paloquemao, in the market. Because it

can be quite tricky, I mean, this is a working market. And people are here to do a job and not necessarily here to act as tour guides or to explain different aspects of the fruit and flowers and chilis that are on sale here. And she said, in her case, she absolutely loves the fact that tourists come to Paloquemao. She said that she loves it when tour guides bring tourists to her stall. And they usually do because it is one of the unique stalls at Paloquemao. And she said she loves her business, and she loves showing her business to others and talking about her business, 'cause that's what's been able to bring up her family. And I asked her what she would recommend that people do whilst they're in the plaza apart from obviously visiting her chili stall. And she suggested trying... I bought a whole juice, and she said you definitely got to try a fruit like the pitaya, and just take a walk around. People will let you taste things and they'll let you look at things, and just enjoy being around this incredible variety of fruit, veg and flowers. And just before I go, I ask Eugenia to tell me a little bit about the flowers here in Paloquemao. Paloquemao is famous for its flower market as well, and she said "ooohhh," and this wistful that comes into her eyes, and she said "oh, that really is one of our strengths here in Paloquemao." She said the flower stalls begin to open at about 3 o'clock in the morning. It's a great time to come and you will see flowers of every color, every shape, and every size you can possibly imagine. She said "if you do come here to have a look at the flowers, there's no way that you're gonna leave without a bunch of flowers under your arm because we have the best flowers right here." And now it's sadly my time to bid farewell to Eugenia. It's always lovely to see her. I come here about once a month to buy my chilis, a nice bag full of chilis that should get me through about the next month. And I would recommend very much that you visit her, if you come to Paloquemao.



So I find myself on a hill high above Bogotá in the Barrio Egipto. I'm here with Andrés Saavedra, better known as El Pato. El Pato runs a really interesting tourism business which takes people on tours of this neighborhood, near to the center of Bogotá.

**Andrés:** Mi nombre es José Andrés Saavedra Pineda. Soy orgullosamente nacido y criado en el barrio Egipto, descendiente de las primeras personas que habitaron estos territorios.

Andrés, El Pato, tells me that he's a proud citizen of this neighborhood. He's lived here all his life and he's the son of parents who came here from Boyacá many years ago. Andrés took a tourism course in the Universidad Externado which is just below us. In fact, it was the first place I ever worked in Colombia. He took a tourism course there, he's graduated in tourism. And now, his life is spent taking people on tours around this neighborhood. So I ask Pato to tell me about some of the historical figures that might have walked these streets, and he said Simón Bolívar, the great Liberator of the northern part of South America, walked these streets. He walked through these neighborhoods. And there are many old cobbled paths, the



old 'caminos reales' as they call them, going up the mountains from here. We're right on the edge of Bogotá, from just behind us is where the mountain vegetation starts. And Pato tells me that he doesn't only do open tourism. He also does rural tourism. So if you want to walk the ancient paths in the mountains above Bogotá, which to be honest, doing on your own is not possible. And he says they're actually even tunnels they take you up to that Simón Bolívar used with his army to move from this part of Bogotá down to the south of Bogotá to avoid the Republican army forces, and, wow, I will be back very soon to spend the day with Pato walking the mountains. And he said you can also, if you're up for a climb, there's a cobbled path that goes all the way up to the statue of Guadalupe, way up above Bogotá.





And this really is a very, very interesting neighborhood. Interesting in the sense that Pato and his partners are providing opportunities to young people and have real, honest, economic opportunities. And the other part that makes it really interesting is because it's a really beautiful neighborhood. These cobbled streets coming up the steep mountain roads. These beautiful graffiti murals all over the walls. The houses are all painted a multitude of colors. You've got little benches on the pavement so you can sit down and take a rest when you're out of breath from climbing up these steep slopes. It's a, it's a pretty cool place and it's a really unusual place. I can tell you, as somebody who lives in Bogota, it's really special to be able to come here. But believe me, you'll receive the most amazing welcome from the people here because to them as well, it's fantastic to be able to bring people here.





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