

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Cundinamarca

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.

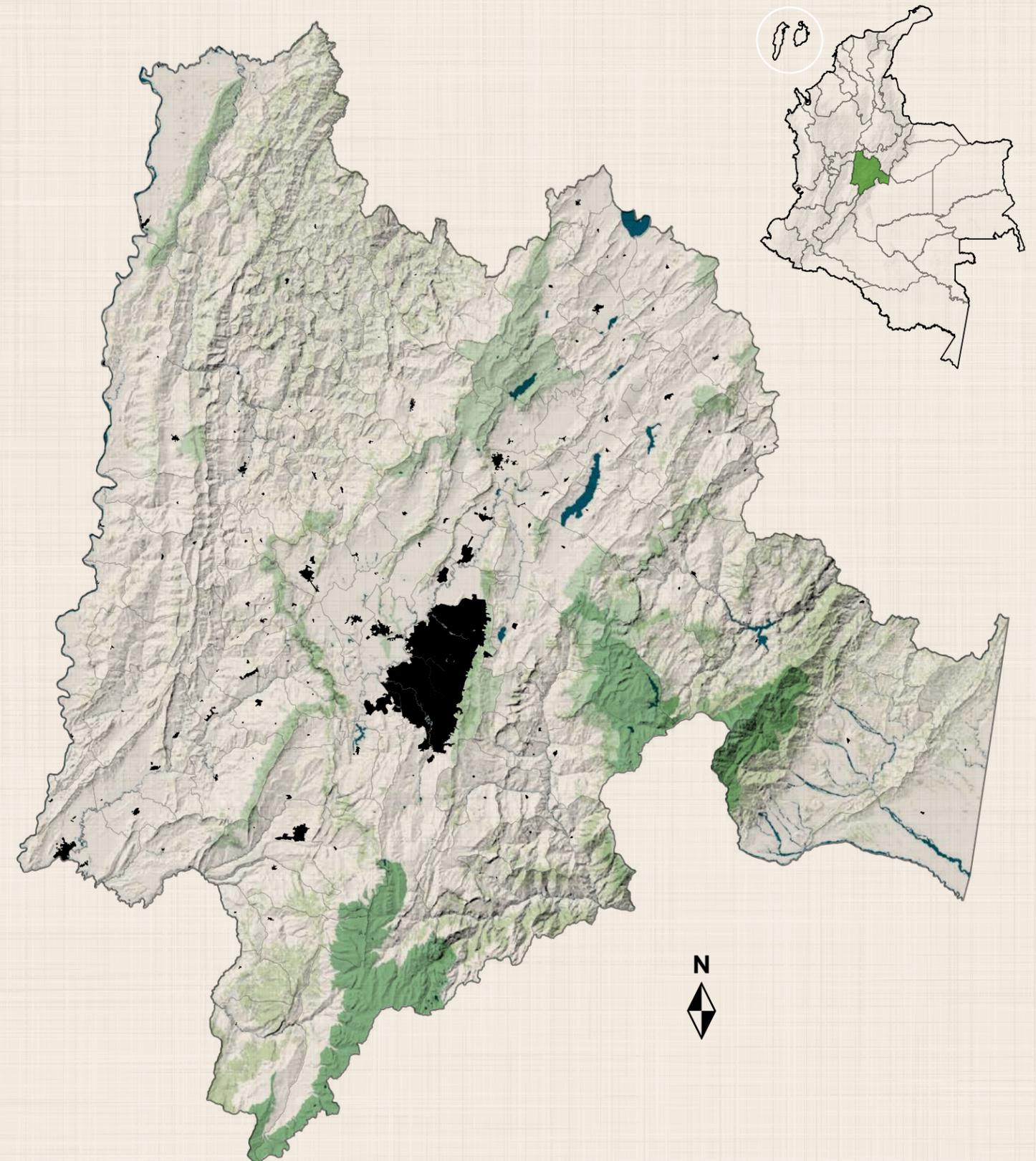
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Cundinamarca

In this episode of the podcast, I'll be journeying through the department of Cundinamarca. Cundinamarca's the department that surrounds the capital city of Bogotá. It's set in the mountains, although it does have some lowland areas to the west. But it's mainly a mountainous department. And I've chosen to come through the mountains to the Guatavita lake. The reason I've chosen Guatavita is, point in fact, it's absolutely gorgeous. And I get to ride my bike out here, which I'll tell you about in just a moment. Guatavita is potentially the source of one of the most pervasive of all myths and legends in America. And that's the legend of El Dorado. El Dorado being the mythical city of gold that the Spanish conquistadores spent years, decades, centuries searching for. In the historical record, there is actually a fair amount of evidence to suggest that the myth of El Dorado was just that. It was a myth which was in fact invented by cultures that wanted to get rid of the Spanish invaders, because they knew that the only thing the Spanish were

interested in was pillaging as much gold as they possibly could, and other riches if there were. And so it was very much easier rather than trying to convince them that there was no gold left for them to steal, to say, "oh, yeah, you know, just over the next hill, just over the next mountain there's the city of gold and you wouldn't believe." And they would construct this narrative to basically just get rid of these, these colonial invaders. But the real truth is obviously lost in history. What we have today are a number of myths and legends and one of the most pervasive, as I said, and one of the most compelling is the myth that Guatavita is the site of El Dorado. And we'll be learning about that later on in the podcast, from my guide.



For this particular part of my journey, I chose to travel by bicycle. I'm an avid cyclist. I do a lot of cycling in this part of the world and this is actually one of my favorite routes when I'm looking for something fairly short, but substantial if you are a cyclist or you are an enthusiast in any way of cycling, and you want to give it a try, you can... There's plenty of places in Bogotá that you can rent bicycles. And... it's a bit of a challenging ride. The first part is not too bad. You've got a fairly steep climb, coming out of Bogotá, about 5 kms, sort of fivish percent. But after that it's basically rolling hills for about the next 40 km. It's absolutely gorgeous. You're coming through, basically the valleys which lie between the mountain peaks of Colombia's eastern mountain range. After a while you arrive. You go past a couple of large artificial manmade lakes, the first of which is San Rafael and the second is Tominé, which provide water and power to the inhabitants of Bogotá. Tominé, in particular, is a huge manmade lake, and just before you get to the turnoff to the Laguna de Guatavita, the Guatavita lake, you go through the town of Guatavita, which is well worth a stop and to have a look around. It's actually a completely artificially constructed town. The original village of Guatavita lay under the water line of the new lake, so when the dam was being built and the lake was being planned out, the original inhabitants of the village of Guatavita were rehoused, the whole village was moved. And it's definitely worth a visit and having a wander around. There's some beautiful views out across the lake as well. The reflections on the lake are absolutely stunning, of the clouds on cloudy days, so that the sky in the mountains behind on more sunny days. And then after you come past the lake, you do need to be a fairly strong cyclist for the next part. I'm on it right now. There's about a 7 km climb up to the lake, which gets quite steep. There are a huge number of, I don't know, hundreds of glamping sites and Eco hotels,



and five-star hotels and it's a really popular tourist destination for Bogotanos specially looking to escape the city for a weekend. But it means there's a multitude of places that if you want to, you could make this into a two-day trip, cycle out, on day one visit the lake, spend the night in a nice hotel, a little glamping. Get out early the next morning and cycle back to Bogotá. And there's loads of places along the way to eat. It's really easy to find breakfast, lunch, dinner, on the road, if you're more into that. So I'm going to leave it at that, and I'm going to head on up to the lake. I think about another two or three kilometers of climbing at somewhere around 4 to 5% awaiting me on my bike, and I will be back with you when I'm up at the lake with John Freddie, who I'm going to meet up there.

— Buenos días, estoy buscando a John Freddie. Soy Nicolás. ¿Qué tal, cómo está? Bien, muchas gracias. Muchas gracias.

So, John Freddie, I'd like you to introduce yourself. What's your name, what do you do, and where are you from?

John Freddie: Bienvenidos al territorio. Pues, bueno...

John Freddie is a local from Sesquilé community. He read the name. I will not try to say it myself. And so for a long time access to the site was restricted. I know from personal experience because I tried to come here and was told that it was closed. So I asked John Freddie to tell me why.





John Freddie: Resulta que este proceso ha sido muy bonito porque, más o menos en el año 2000...

So, John Freddie was just telling me a little about the journey of the park. And so, around about 2000, the CAR, which is a local government-linked conservation organization, bought over 600 hectares of land. So they basically bought all the land around the lake, and then shut it down, closed it to visitors for 5 years for a spiritual and environmental recovery. And they also built paths, sustainable paths, and built the tourist access to the site, which is why we can now visit it in a much more sustainable way, and it's also why the original inhabitants and their customs have been now highlighted, and as John Freddie said, the spirituality has been brought back to the lake.

The first thing I see as we enter the site is a huge circular cylindrical structure. And I asked John Freddie to explain what it is.

John Freddie: Dentro de nuestra cultura indígena Musca se llama Cusmuy

So the structure is a ceremonial place, largely for ceremonies marking stages of the year. Equinox, as we go through the year, the 21st of March being the Muisca new year. And the structures around everything... he said it's all about the flow of energy. The flow of nature, the way in which it interacts with the Mother Earth. There's a specific entrance and a specific exit. The entrance is facing to the east where the sun rises. So you go in through the eastern entrance and you leave through the western exit. So John Freddie is telling me that one of the things that characterizes a visit to La Laguna del Cacique Guatavita, which is the lake of the Guatavita chief, is that people are sometimes surprised because they ride thinking that they're just going to quickly jump out of the car, take a photo or a selfie of them in front of the lake, and

then drive off. But this is not a place for that. This is a place where you arrive, you're given historical information, cultural information, and then once you're up at the lake, it's up to you. He said he talks people through the legend of the Guatavita chief and he ensures that, just as they reach the lake he finishes the story, so you leave with the story in your head.

John Freddie: Uno siempre lleva al visitante hasta el primer mirador.

I asked John Freddie to tell me why you aren't allowed to come into the park without a guide. And the reason that John Freddie gave me for why you can't come into the park alone is that there was some kind of an accident a few years back. I mean, obviously, I'm incredibly sad that something bad happened to somebody but it sounds like a bit of a knee-jerk reaction to me, to be honest. I'd far rather see a bit more education and a bit less prohibition. And I told him I find it quite ironic as well, because this is such a spiritual place. It really is a place for personal meditation, and reflection of one's place in the world. And to have to do it in the company of a guide... but there we go. And it turns out that when he was talking to me about it, you actually... you only have to be with the guide for the first part of the route. After that, apparently you're free to wander as you see fit for the rest of the day. If that's what takes your fancy.

So now we've reached the part that I think we've all been waiting for. I definitely have and it's time for John Freddie to tell me about the ceremony, which gave rise to the legend of El Dorado and its association with the Guatavita lake. And so, here it is, the story of the chief bathed in gold.

John Freddie: Comienza la ceremonia allá en el Cosmuy. Toda esa noche comienza la ceremonia.



So that's fascinating. So the future cacique, the future chief would be dressed in ceremonial robes. He would be walked up to the lip of the lake. The community would then turn their backs because the next part was very intimate. He would then be undressed. The community would begin to play their instruments and he would be covered with a sticky plant extract, followed by honey. So then the traditional spiritual advisers would then use long bamboo tubes, and they would fill them with powdered gold and they would blow the powdered gold all over the cacique, which is the sound that John Freddie was making. The community never sees their chief covered in gold because it's considered to be a very intimate moment. So throughout the entire process, they have their backs to him. Everyone's still got their backs to him, he's now covered in gold. The raft, which he says, a lot of people believe was made of gold, was not made of gold. It was made of a stuff called chusque, kind of a wild mountain grass. And the raft would be treated in the same way as the chief. So it was not a golden gold raft, it was a raft covered in gold powder. The cacique would then get onto the raft. He would go out into the middle of the lake, the drums would be playing and he would wait. This was all done at night. He would then wait until the first ray of sun came over there at the top of the nearest mountain and shone on him. At that point he would dive into the lake, and this was all part of a fertility ritual, the lake being the feminine form, the lake being the Mother Earth. When people heard the sound of him jumping into the water, they would take off their earrings, necklaces, bracelets, whatever, any kind of jewelry they had, and they would throw them behind them into the water as an offering to their new chief, and also as an offering to Mother Earth, and it's part of the fertility symbology of the event. He would then wash the gold powder off, which was the sperm fertilizing the waters of the lake. At



that point four horns would sound at each of the four corners of the lip of the lake, and this was a sign for people that the ceremony had come to an end, and they could turn around and observe their new chief. He would be given his staff, his wooden staff, which was

the symbol of the chief. Which he would then bang on the ground and everybody would know that they had a new chief.

So I had a fantastic day. It's always nice to have an excuse for a bike ride. Not that I ever need

an excuse, but I came out here on my bike this morning, met John Freddie, fascinating guy from the new young generation of his community. And hearing him tell me about the ceremony was really quite special. I mean, it's a story I've read many times before but to have somebody from the local indigenous

community tell me the story and explain a little bit more about its significance was a really special experience. And John Freddie told me that he would like to be the one to close this chapter with a song which is a homage to water and to the lake. A song with a melody interpreted by John Freddie himself.



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