

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Caldas

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.

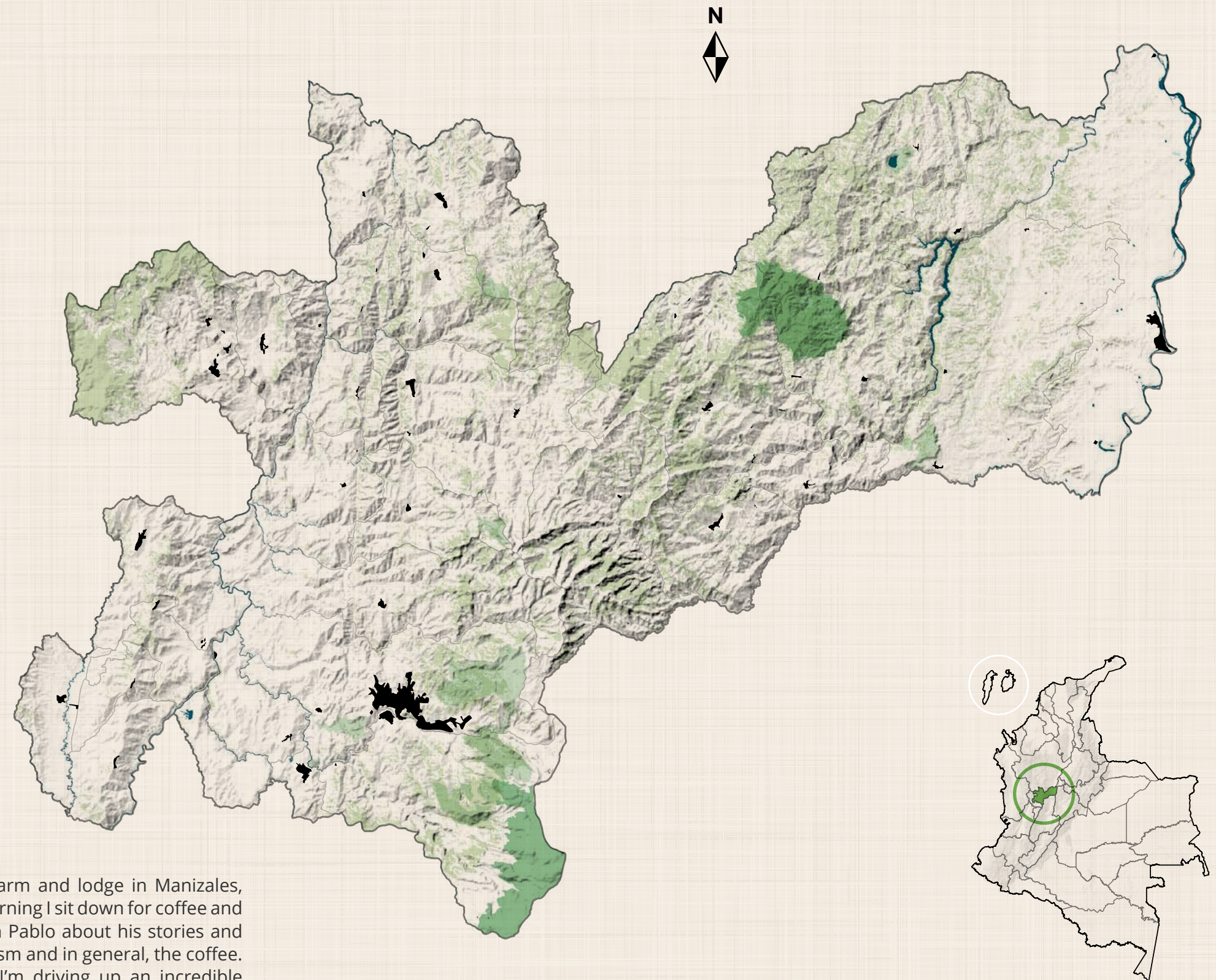
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Caldas

I'm Nick Perkins and this episode is a journey through the mountains and coffee fields in the Department of Caldas in Colombia's Central mountain range. I set off from Mariquita at half past 6 in the morning to get a head start on the day, and took the mythical road up to Alto de Letras, a road that in cycling circles is said to be the longest climb in the world. Climbs up over 80 kilometers from 300 or so meters above sea level up to close to 4,000. And from there I head up on to Nevados National Park where I spend an afternoon with my guide, María Eugenia, exploring the high mountains and stunning vistas up and over 4,000 meters above sea level in the park, talking about life, the world and everything. And then I spend the night at my friend Juan

Pablo's coffee farm and lodge in Manizales, and the next morning I sit down for coffee and a chat with Juan Pablo about his stories and projects in tourism and in general, the coffee. But right now, I'm driving up an incredible mountain road.





So this road up to the Parque de Los Nevados from Mariquita is absolutely stunning. Incredible, without equal, in my experience at least. I've just driven the last 5 to 10 km along a ridge on the top of one of the many peaks with drop-offs on either side falling hundreds, literally hundreds of meters down into the valleys on either side. But then there are mountain peaks even taller than the one I'm driving along on either side as well. You can also see why this area of the country is called Coffee Country as you start driving up out of Mariquita the coffee plants start to appear. And right now, I'm looking out over a view, I can probably see for 50 odd kilometers and the vegetation that I can make out is basically all coffee plantations up and down the sides of the mountains interspersed with plantain. And just now, I just came through a little village but just as I was coming through the village, all of a sudden the clouds in front of me opened up for just a moment and I caught sight of the magnificent peak of the Nevado del Ruiz way, way ahead of me in the distance, and that's where I'm going.

I've been driving for about an hour and a half and having started off at around, about 470 odd meters above sea level, I am now at 2,200 meters above sea level and with temperature, being a function of altitude, starting to get quite chilly. I left this morning in a t-shirt feeling very warm and have just got to put a jacket on to alleviate the chill, which I'm starting to

feel. And I'm now up on the high mountain pass, the Alto de Letras. I'm at 3,680 meters above sea-level. Vegetation's changed, there's still vegetation on the mountain sides, but it's changed a lot. Trees are much smaller on the mountain rocks appearing on the peaks in the distance. So I've just seen the sign to the Parador Turístico La Esperanza, 'The Esperanza' tourist stop; view point I guess would be a better way of saying it, which is where I'm gonna be meeting María Eugenia. I'm getting really excited now.

—¿María Eugenia?

👤 María Eugenia: ¿Cómo está?

—¿Qué tal? ¿Cómo está?

👤 María Eugenia: Hola, ¿cómo va todo?

—Bien, bien. Súper.

👤 María Eugenia: ¿Y qué tal el día?

—¡Perfecto!

👤 María Eugenia: Le voy a contar algo: Hacía 5 días o más no salía el sol. Está súper bueno. Puede venir más seguido.



So, we're off to, basically go through the changing vegetation we got up to the park. Right now we're in a páramo ecosystem, which is a high mountain ecosystem. Low scrubland, lots of the plants called 'frailejones' part of the sunflower family, actually, and we're going up much more, we're going to go above the tree line, to the much more desolate area of the mountain above the tree line in just a few short kilometers. We're gonna climb up to well above 4,000 meters.

So we just stopped for a second at the point at which the páramo ecosystem starts turning into the high mountain ecosystem. We're at about 4,100 meters above sea level. To my left there's still the páramo ecosystem with the frailejón plants poking up above it and to my right is now the mountain ecosystem. It becomes much more rocky, the scrublands much sparser, you can start seeing bits of scree slope and in the distance, just through the clouds, you can just about make out the beginning of the snow line.

María Eugenia: Estamos entrando por la zona norte. Acá estamos a 4,138 metros de altura.

So, María Eugenia has been just pointing out some of the key local points on the map; where we're standing right now is right at the very entrance of the park and we're gonna drive into the park. We'll drive up about five kilometres, which is as far as you're allowed to go by car. And we'll be in a place called the "Desierto de la Soledad," "The Desert of Solitude," and from there, we're gonna take a



walk and I am going to describe a little bit about where we're walking, what it looks like while we're there. She was explaining that there are three peaks in the park: there's the Nevado del Ruiz, which is the one we're going to go up, to reach about four and a half thousand meters above sea level; there's the Nevado de Santa Isabel, which is just over 5,100 above sea level, a little bit lower; and then there's also the Nevado del Tolima, which is at 5,215 meters above sea level. María Eugenia is giggling in the background because I was leaning over to look at the number printed here on the map.

So we just stopped at about just over 4,200 meters above sea level, and we're now in what María Eugenia told me is called the superpáramo ecosystem. And this is where the páramo ecosystem really fully transitions into the high mountain ecosystem. We're also very close to the tree line and up above that it's just this magnificent, light gray, almost white boulder peak rising up above me and there's still more to go. The actual Nevado del Ruiz peak itself is behind what I'm looking at now, and it's gorgeous up here, it's another world. It's so peaceful, desolate. Yeah, beautiful place, just to sit and think.

María Eugenia: Yo digo que hoy es el único día despejado de la última semana.

So we managed to find the only non-cloudy day for the last week, María Eugenia tells me, which is such a joy. The views are just amazing. We have now come up a bit further; you can probably hear me a bit out of breath. We're very high up now and there's a sheer pink cliff in front of me which is being produced by some ancient lava flow. In the distance we can see another volcano, they call it "El Volcán de la Olleta," which is usually shrouded in mist, and is completely clear today. Absolutely defined detail of its collapsed edges in front of us.

So I just said my goodbyes to María Eugenia and I'm heading down to Manizales where I'm going to spend the night at my friend Juan Pablo's coffee farm and lodge, and I'll be talking to him tomorrow morning about his tourism initiatives and why you should visit a coffee farm while you're in this part of the world. Got a 2 hour or so drive ahead of me, and then I'll be down in the slightly warmer climate of Manizales, coffee in hand.

Juan Pablo: Nick, muy buenos días, muchas gracias. Qué gusto tenerlos por acá.

So I'm sitting here with Juan Pablo Echeverry, and he's the owner of a beautiful coffee plantation set in rolling hills, close to the town of Manizales. This is really interesting. So, Juan Pablo is saying that his family's been involved in coffee production for many, many years, going back to his great-grandparents. He himself is actually an industrial engineer, he chose a different path for himself, he went to study in Bogotá, he lived outside Colombia, and he was talking about the way that his family has been very, very much involved with coffee production for many years. His father was involved with the Federación Nacional de Cafeteros, which is the Colombian National Coffee Federation, very much involved in monitoring and legislating of the processes of coffee production in Colombia, but he chose a different path. And then, in the early 2000s, there was a crisis in the price of coffee in Colombia and a lot of people going out of business and Juan Pablo took the decision to come back, actually, interestingly, to his roots, as it were, and to take charge of this family business. But he didn't want to do it, he said, he didn't want to close himself up in this green cage, as he calls it, this green cage, I mean, it's beautiful here, you're surrounded by nature, it's absolutely gorgeous and it was just around the time as well when people were beginning to look at different models for commercializing coffee. So, rather than going through the standard grower-middleman model, where the end-user is lost and invisible to the producer, he decided to





embrace a model of direct commercialization, so he has more direct contact with the people that actually drink his coffee.

Juan Pablo: El tipo de viajero que queremos atender es el viajero curioso del mundo.

Continued chatting for quite a while as we drink our coffee, and he tells me that he loves having people to stay who are curious about the world, he loves helping people to understand more about the coffee that they drink and he's developed a whole coffee experience from the bean to the cup. And he also said he loves giving people tips, so that when people prepare coffee in the future whether it's in their home or in a business, they'll prepare it for a little twist that they've learned with him and his staff on the farm. He runs coffee tasting classes where he teaches people how to identify and appreciate, and discuss and state the aromas and flavors that they find in the coffee that they drink. And beyond that, he's also diversified what he offers, and he's developed a specialized offering around bird watching on the Finca Venecia. I mean, it's a fairly large farm, but, you know, it's just one farm. There are more than two hundred and fifty species of birds, Juan Pablo tells me. There are also species of migratory birds that pass over his land, and some even stop to rest and recover in Finca Venecia. So, there's just a plethora of bird watching opportunities. And they use or teach people who are not familiar with platforms like eBird and Merlin how to use them and how to become more avid birdwatchers. And he ended by telling me that being out in his farm bird watching is like doing yoga, without doing yoga, in nature. Just the sounds, the colors and the nature all around you, just caress you and relax you. I spent a wonderful, thought provoking 24 hours in Caldas. And over the following days Maria Eugenia and Juan Carlos' passion for sharing the local treasures with others turns out to be infectious. I think I'll be heading back to Caldas as soon as I can.



📍 María Eugenia: Esto para llegar al punto de amarlo tanto hay que conocerlo.

Beautiful words from María Eugenia, really a message for her country's people. She said, "you can't care for something unless you know it," so come here and get to know this beautiful place, these beautiful white cliffs and help us take care of them.



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