

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Quindío

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.

Quindío

So I'm just about to head out and meet my guide for today, Edison. Here in the Valle del Cocora, near the beautiful town of Salento, in the department of Quindío. So I'm now right on the other side of Los Nevados National Park from where I began, close to the Nevado del Ruíz. I'm completely on the other side of the park. One of the other entrance, the southern entrance to the park, in the Valle del Cocora, which is one of Colombia's emblematic nature sites. It's famous for its wax palms which are high mountain palms that grow incredibly tall and cover the valleys that I'm about to go up and explore with Edison. So it's an absolutely magnificent sight, so I am really looking forward to going back. I've only been here once before, very briefly. So I'm looking forward to going back and learning a bit more with Edison, who sounds like a really knowledgeable, interesting local guide. And the other thing is, if we're really lucky, we might see condors flying above us as we explore the Valle del Cocora. It's also

a really important coffee growing region and an important region for cattle ranching. So I stayed last night at a lovely Boutique Hotel and it's about two kilometers out of Salento, so you're out of the kind of noise and the bustle of the city. It's a working dairy farm, which is converted... some of its buildings into a lovely Boutique Hotel. And I just bought some coffee from a neighboring farm, which they sell here at the hotel. Looking forward to trying that when I get home. But anyway, for now, I'm off to meet Edison and start my trip up into the beautiful wax palm-lined valleys of the Valle del Cocora.

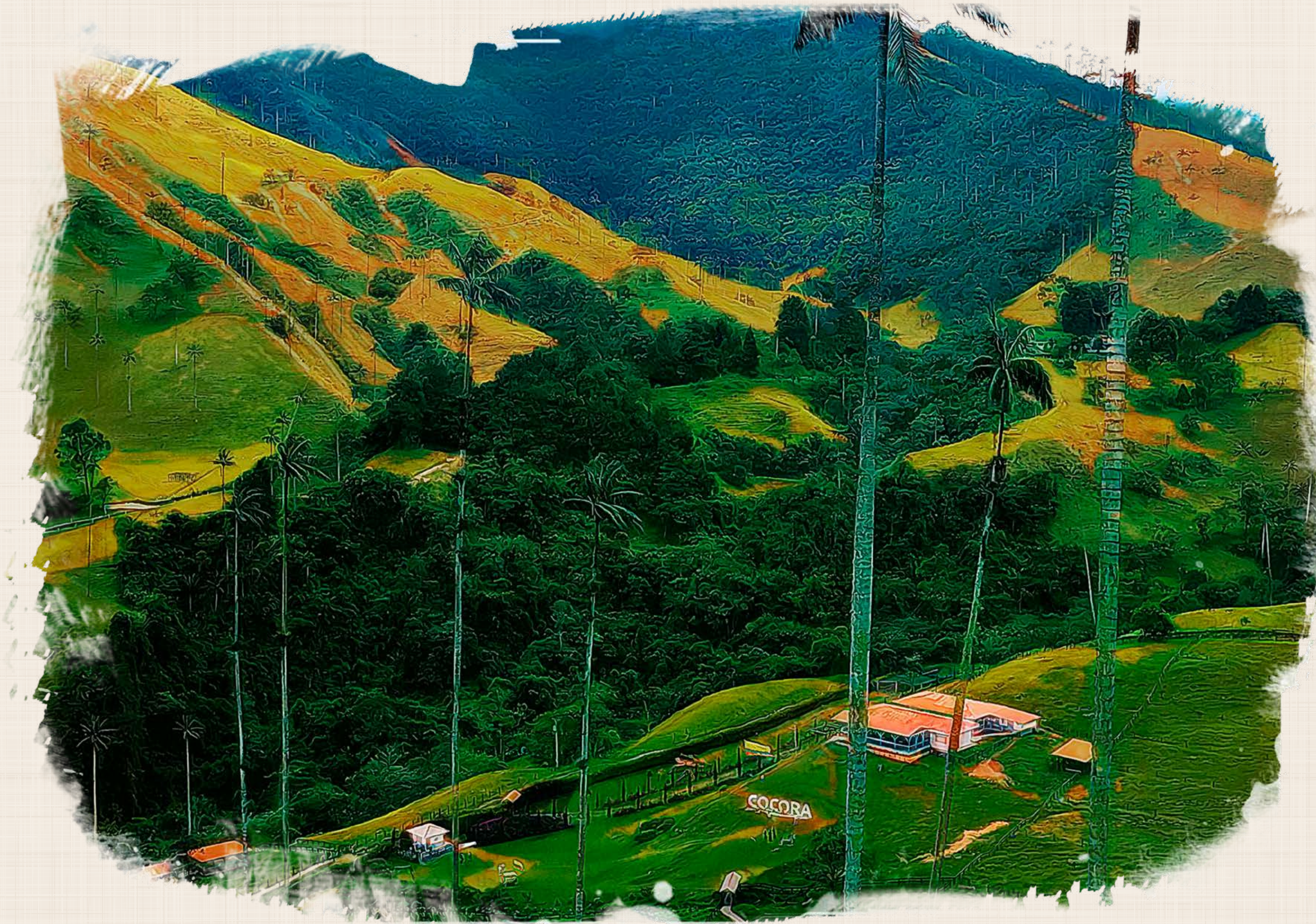


So I just came into Salento to meet Edison. Salento's a little village, beautiful little village built on a ridge surrounded by mountains. So all the buildings are in a colonial style, they're all painted in bright colors, it's absolutely gorgeous and it's known as the village of short streets and long memories. So I'm looking forward to see what memories are inspired in me today.

Edison and I just drove up out of Salento. We drove into the... up to the start of the Valle del Cocora. And as you start driving up you're going through dairy farms, gets more and more rural and then all of a sudden you come around a corner and the wax palms begin to appear, these incredibly thin, incredibly tall, sort of almost impossible structures with a really long trunk. We're talking 20, 30, 40 meters high. I'll ask Edison to explain a little bit more in a moment. Topped with the traditional palm branches and leaves. They're absolutely amazing sights. And I'll be talking to Edison as we go up and walking up the mountain about the different aspects of the local flora and fauna.

So, I asked Edison to tell me little bit about what we're going to be doing today and about the wax palm itself. And so he tells he's planning to walk up into the wax palm lined valley. He's going to take me up to where I can be enveloped by the magic of the place, he tells me. That sounds like fun. And then he tells me a bit about the wax palm and he says he knows of seven species of wax palm in Colombia, and a couple more in Ecuador and Venezuela. The one that we're going to be seeing today is the *Ceroxylon Quindiuense*, it's the tallest palm tree in the world, and it's among the three tallest trees in the world, alongside the Sequoia in Southern California and the Australian eucalyptus. It's also Colombia's national tree.





So this particular wax palm is the *Ceroxylon quindiuense*, which means wax on wood. The ancient original peoples of these lands, would use the wax for different purposes. And it was also used, he said, during the Second World War as a way of waterproofing the holes of boats in the Second World War.

Edison pointed out there are two palms, one next to the other. So there's one which is very thin and incredibly tall, 62 meters tall. And, so the one next to it is about 40 meters tall. And he was explaining that this is a male and female plant. The male plant has a stockier trunk and shorter. The female plant has a much thinner trunk, and it's much taller. The New York Times spoke of them as being "the dances of the Colombian Andes." We've got palms growing up to about 62 meters tall, which is the tallest that they grow. He said it's a geographical accident, as it were, here. There's very high rainfall and low luminosity, it's quite a cloud cover for most of the year. It means the palms become much more competitive and they grow much taller here than in other places. So the tallest ever up just until now is the one we were just looking at, which is 62 meters tall, and they range in size from there, down in different parts of the world they're in different sizes.

I just asked Edison about his own personal journey. He's not from Salento, he's originally from Medellín. And he came to Salento to look for an uncle of his, who'd been missing for a long time. He actually found him, working on a local cattle farm. But he said when he got to Salento, he said it was just bizarre, it was just this silence after the craziness of Medellín. But he said what really made him fall in love with the place. The first time he came out into the valley at night. He said the stars on a clear night were just absolutely incredible. His uncle said to him, "hey listen, there's a guy in a restaurant in town, and he's got some work, are you interested?" Edison said "yeah." So he went off down, and the guy says, "look there's a group of biologists who've come, and they want to go up and study the palms. Could you take them up there?" And Edison knew the way. And he said, "yeah sure, I'll take them up." And a friend of him lent him a book that kind of changed his life, called the Bosque de Niebla de Colombia, which is the Colombian Cloud Forest. And he read the book and he took the biologists off up into the park area. And that's Edison's origin story, I guess.

And all of a sudden, Edison gets excited and interrupts his story because we've just walked up to the tallest of the wax palms in the valley.



So we're now standing right in front of the tallest palm that's been measured in the entire valley. This is the one that's 62 meters tall. And it's believed that it's between 180 and 200 years old. Absolutely, magnificent. Really slim trunk. It's just unbelievably tall, up 60 meters above where we're standing now.

So I asked Edison to explain a little bit about the actual structure of the palm itself. The trunk is actually hollow. I'll see if this comes across in the recording. I'm not sure. Mmm I don't know if you can hear that but you can feel it as you tap it. It's a hollow trunk and he said that it was used by the indigenous peoples of the region as water pipes. So they would use the fallen trunks to transport water from the lakes higher up in the páramo ecosystem down to where they needed it. Down to the settlements.

And just as we turn around to head back to the car after a lovely day walking through the valley, all of a sudden a pair of condors appears in the mountain above us, and it's just the most incredible sight.

We were just talking about life, the world and everything, and Edison just stopped and he said "look, there's the condor." It's an enormous condor just gliding across the valley. And she's coming towards us.





—Viene.

👤 **Edison:** Sí, sí, sí.

—¿Ella está de cacería cuando vuela?

👤 **Edison:** Sí. Está patrullando el área de ella.

She's on patrol, Edison says. Oh, she's found something. She's diving. What's she going for?

👤 **Edison:** Está el otro allá, mira.

—¡Oh!

She's found her mate. There's two of them. They've just landed.

—¡Tres, mira! Volaron dos para allá.

What a way to finish my visit to the department of Quindío, here in the Valle de Cocora. A pair of condors soaring above us through the mountains. Absolutely a majestic sight. And also, the fact that in the foreground, hundreds and hundreds of wax palms over all the slopes of all the mountains you can see just makes it even more special.



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