

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Putumayo

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.

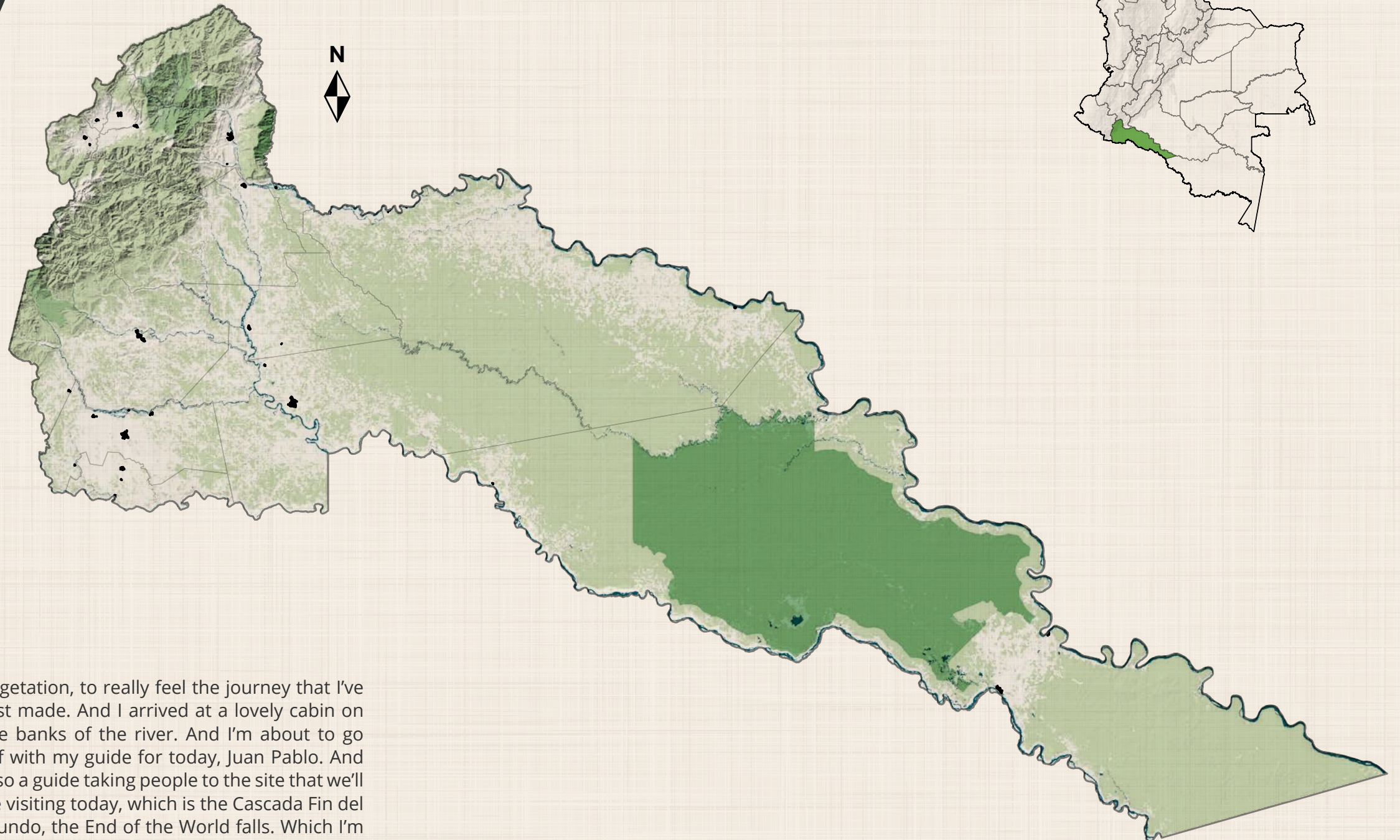
In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors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

Putumayo



So I've just arrived to my resting place for tonight, in the department of Putumayo, which is the subject of this episode. Beautiful drive over this morning. I drove over from San Agustín, in Huila, so you climb for a long while 'till you hit the mountain pass. And then it's a long descent, something like eighty or a hundred kilometers, descending down through ever-changing vegetation... starts changing very subtly from the high mountain vegetation of the northern Andes. And as you get lower, you suddenly realize that what you're looking at has changed and it now looks a little bit more like jungle vegetation, as you keep on descending, you've still got these rolling mountains all around you. But the vegetation flowing up and down their slopes is a much more jungle looking vegetation and you keep on descending through little hamlets and villages. It's such a joy for me, at least, to move through the changing

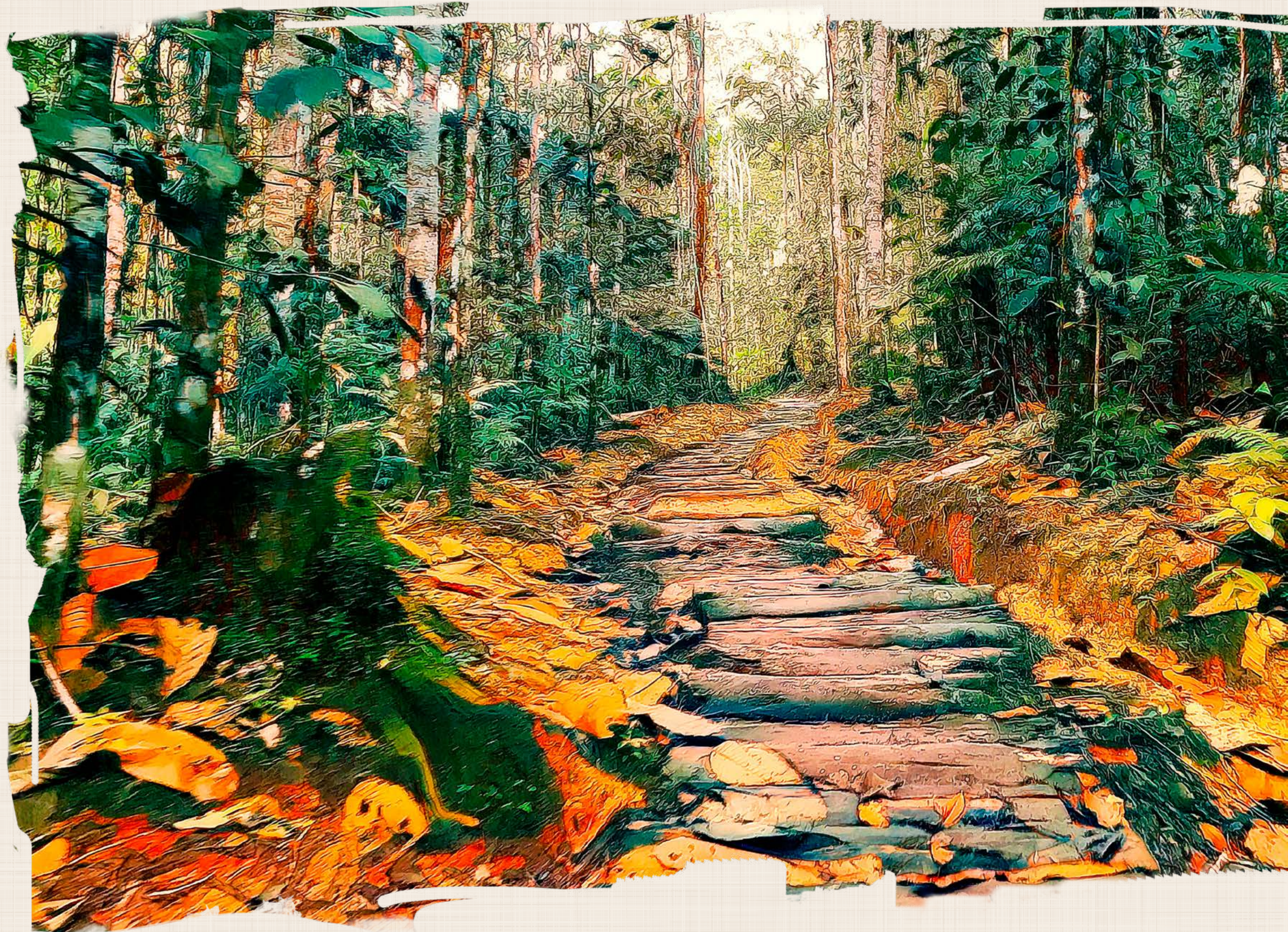
vegetation, to really feel the journey that I've just made. And I arrived at a lovely cabin on the banks of the river. And I'm about to go off with my guide for today, Juan Pablo. And also a guide taking people to the site that we'll be visiting today, which is the Cascada Fin del Mundo, the End of the World falls. Which I'm quite looking forward to. I've heard about it a lot over the years, but I've never been

here. And it's going to be great to go along with Juan Pablo, find out a bit more about the local area and tourism initiatives, and what tourism has meant for him as a person. To get here, basically there's one paved road in and one paved road out, and that's the road I took today, to Pitalito. You can do it by bus, small public jeep transport, where you have fewer passengers, private car and it really is worth it for the views and the perception of the changing environment, as you move out of the Andes and down towards the start of the Amazon basin. And if you're not up for that, you can also get here by plane from Bogotá and you can also drive across from Pasto. Yeah, looking forward to it. It's lovely weather today. It's cloudy, so it's not too hot. The sun hasn't warmed up the day too much, and... but it's not raining. Rains a lot in this part of the world, being a jungle ecosystem. But it's not raining today. So I'll be off in just a moment with Juan Pablo to enjoy the trail.

And off to walking for a couple of minutes down the road, we get to the local tourist corporation. And I meet Ximena, who greets me and welcomes me to the Fin del Mundo trails.

Ximena: Hola Nick, bienvenido a la Corporación Turística Fin del Mundo.

Ximena tells me a little bit about the tourist corporation, what to expect on the trails, and also mentions that there are cabañas that you can rent along the trails, hostels that are completely ecological, absolutely beautiful. Once you're on the trails, there is capacity, in different places for around 30 people in total. She tells me that along the trail there's places where you can fill up the water bottle. So it's going to be completely, a hundred percent in nature. And then also tells me little bit about the corporation and she says it was created with a view to taking care of the local environment and to protect the zone to make





sure it stays as beautiful as it is today. We've got a professional guide coming with us. I'm also assured that once we get to the falls, if I do want to peer over the edge, I will be given a harness that I'll have to wear to keep me safe. And finally, Ximena tells me that all along the way there are lots of natural pools that I can take a swim in if I want to, to cool down from the jungle heat. So let's get going.

Juan Pablo: Estas fincas antes fueron dedicadas al cultivo de piña, la ganadería y la extracción de carbón vegetal.

That's great. So Juan Pablo's telling that the area we're walking through now, which is basically a pristine forest was until very recently just planted with pineapples. And it was also used for logging to make charcoal. And eventually a member of the local community, about 20 years ago, started looking at the topic of tourism, especially around the Fin del Mundo falls, the End of the World falls. And gradually the community came together, Juan Pablo says, and started to look at how they could make tourism a sustainable activity that replaced the crops and the logging they had been doing. So the forest that we're in now has been left to grow for the last 15 years, especially around the End of the World falls.

—De ocho días de la semana ¿cuántos días llueve aquí?

So I ask Juan Pablo for his opinion on how often it rains here. Because the air is so humid. It's not particularly hot today, at all. But I am sweating like never before on this trip. And that's because we've got 95% relative humidity here and that's all about the region being right on the... between the Andean ecosystems and the Amazon ecosystems. And so I asked Juan Pablo, "how many days of the week, out of 7 days, how many does it rain?" And at around the same time, Juan Pablo and Ximena both turn around and said "about 5." So we are standing in front the Pozo Negro, the black pool, which is named... so named because its waters are very, very dark. Juan Pablo was telling me it's got nothing to do with pollution or contamination of any kind. It's just because the pool is so deep and you can actually... if you're into jumping into water falls, there's a little... the river is coming down over quite long falls into the black pool and you can... there's one of two places you can jump from. One is about three and a half to four meters above the water. And the other one is about seven meters above the water. So Juan says obviously if you want to do that, the guide will swim around the pool first and



make sure that there are no logs or anything like that in the water that's been washed down by one of the many rain storms that make the water levels rise. And once they say, they give you the okay you can jump in, about 6 meters deep.

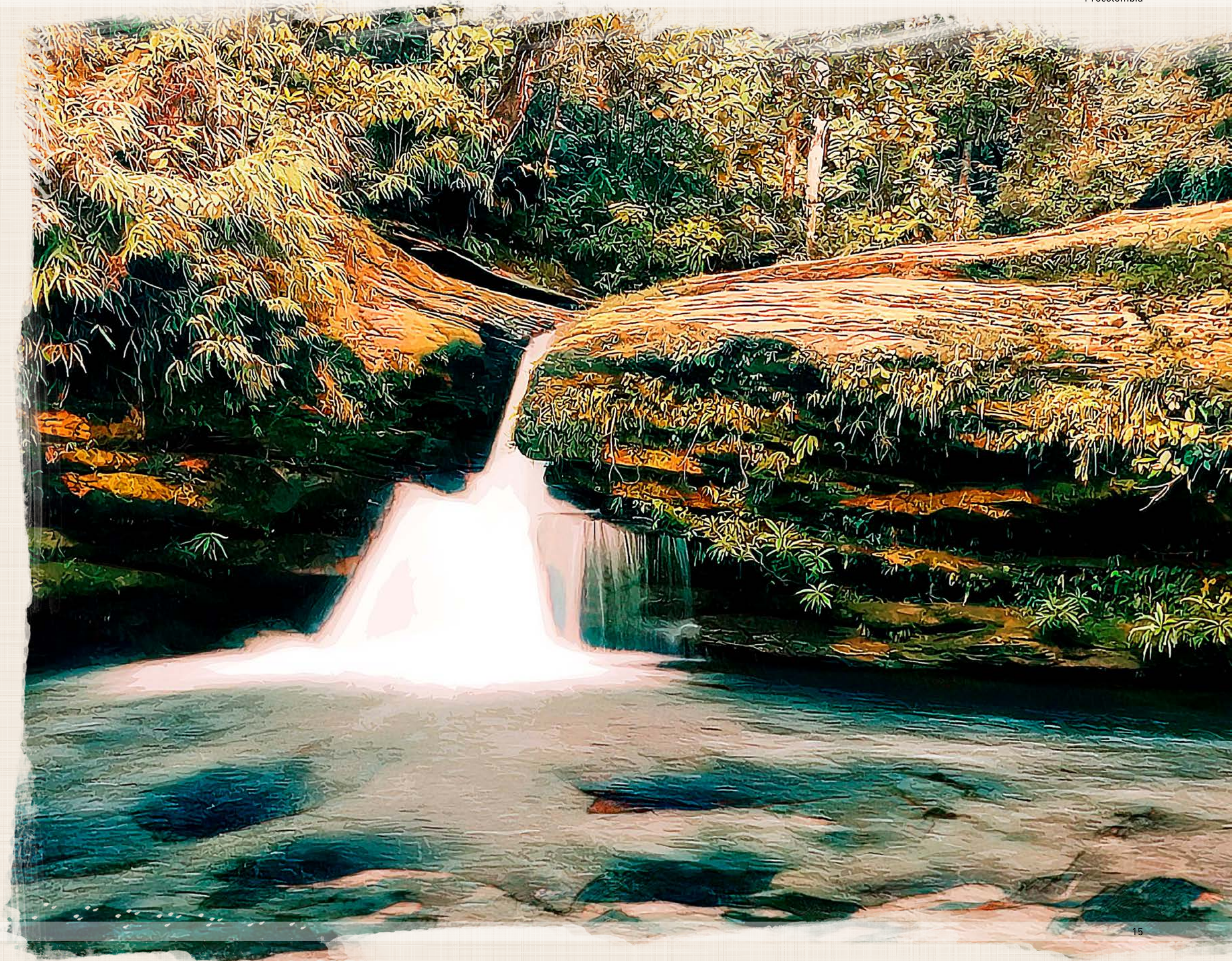
It really is a gorgeous trail running through this semi jungle vegetation. I keep on rushing ahead or hanging back behind my guides, just to really fully appreciate the solitude, the human solitude, of being where I am right now . What you can hear is the sound of the river, various falls, the rapids, and then when you move away from the river, the sound of a multitude of forest life. The leaves and the trees...

So we just reached the End of the World falls, and I can see now why they're called the End of the World falls. The Dantayaco river comes running down through the mountain, completely surrounded by trees and jungle and rocks. And then all of a sudden, you reach the end, there is no more path. It just falls off the edge of a cliff. You can see Mocoa way over in the distance, the mountains behind Mocoa. And what looks like a really small stream of water, but it's actually quite deep and really fast flying, really powerful stream of water, just going flooding over the top of the falls. So our guide, Diego, has just brought out some harnesses. He's going to hook me up to a harness. And then once I've got the harness on, I'm going to be allowed to actually go right to the edge of the falls and look out over them. So there we go. I'm gonna get harnessed up, and just ask what I'm allowed



to do. I'm allowed to record and take photos. Usually they're a little bit more strict with groups of tourists, just for safety reasons. But I'm sure you can ask your guide and they can help you to do that if on the day, it's safe enough. So you get harnessed up, there are a couple of lines painted on the rocks, one of the lines indicate where you have to be harnessed up, and the other line indicates from the point at which you have to go belly down and crawl towards the edge for safety reasons. So I asked Diego if we're allowed... if people do abseiling off the falls, and he said "yeah, yeah." They don't do it themselves, but there's an external agency and there are anchor points that have been placed on top of the falls. And yeah, you can come and abseil down the falls, if that's your thing.

I had an amazing afternoon in Putumayo, chasing waterfalls. The company was great. We had loads to talk about as we walked the trails between the falls. And of course, the highlight of my afternoon was when I'd done the safety harness, and crawled right up to the edge of the falls, and peered down the route of the water to where it crashed into a pool. Way, way below me. It really did feel like I was on the edge of the world.





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