

# STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

La Guajira

**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.

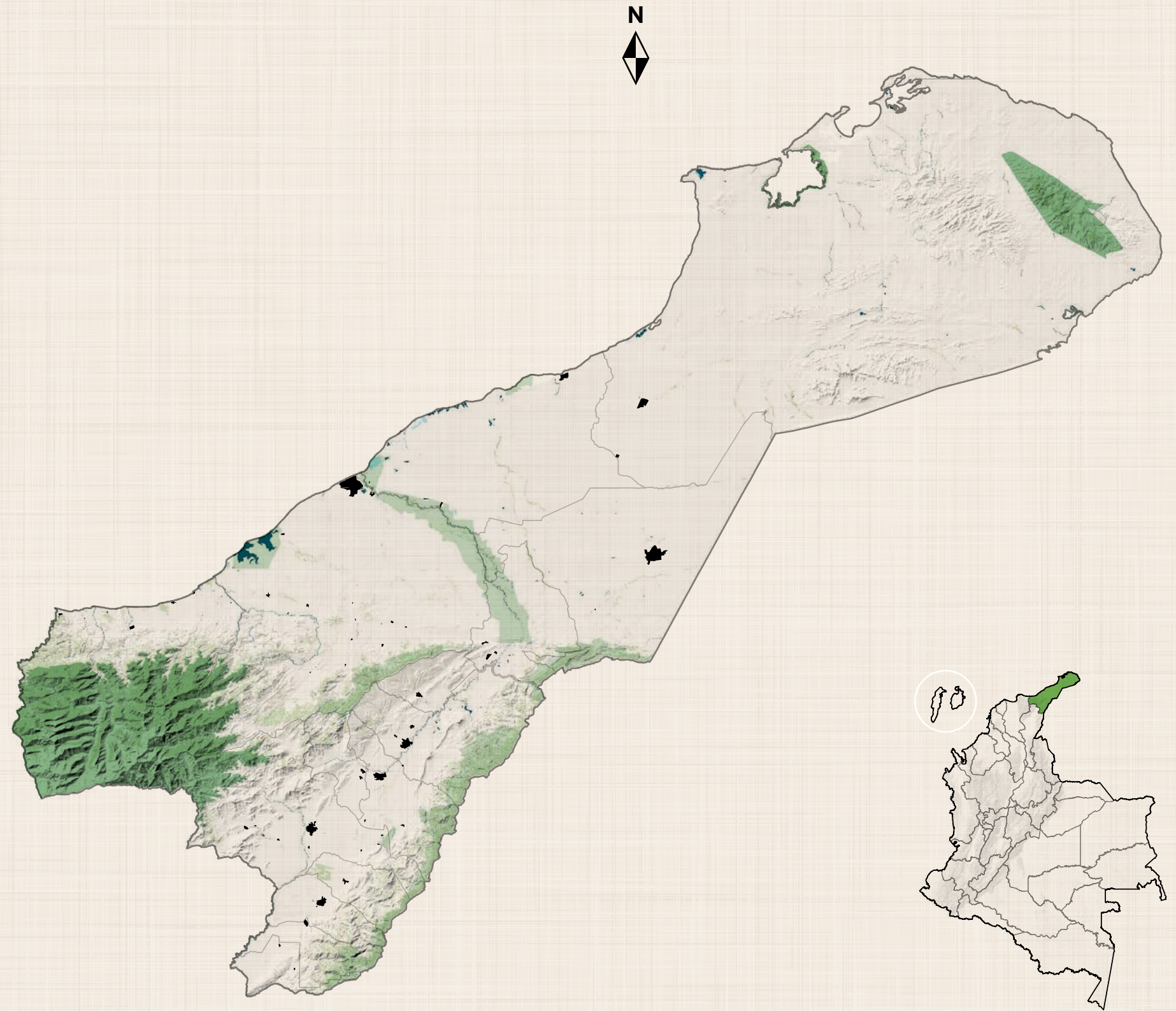
Colombia has something for everyone.

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.

# La Guajira

I'm Nick Perkins and in this episode of the podcast I'm in La Guajira, Colombia's northernmost continental department. The desolate, arid lands of La Guajira are home to the Wayuu people who are known for their fine woven bags that are exported throughout Colombia and further afield. I'll be visiting a flamingo sanctuary, close to the departmental capital, Rioacha, and then I'll spend a couple of hours talking to people from the local community, about how they manage to keep their traditions alive in the context of modern, hyper-connected lifestyles. I begin by meeting my guide, Javier, and heading off to the Flamingo Sanctuary.



So we've arrived at the lagoon. I'm here with my guide, Javier. He's a local guy. He's got an interesting story to tell. I'm going to ask him to tell it on tape, in a moment, and he's going to take me to see the flamingos, which have just arrived here at the Nature Reserve, known as El Santuario, which is why I'm going to ask Javier to tell me a little bit about as well while we're out looking for flamingos. But, yeah, usually this time of year the flamingos, there aren't many flamingos because the water levels drop. But it rained quite a lot over the last few days and a huge group of flamingos turned up this morning, so I'm super excited about that.

Before we head off in the boat I asked Javier what we're gonna to be doing today. So, yeah, we're going to go in an hour and a half trip on a sailboat and then when we get back, Javier is gonna have some freshly cooked fish from this morning's catch. We've got some red snapper and it's served with traditional coconut rice and patacones, which are squashed, fried plantain chips. Absolutely delicious. Looking forward to it.



So, about 30 years ago, outboard motors or any form of motor use in the lagoon was banned and it was basically because flamingos are really skittish birds and to make sure they weren't scared off by the constant passing of lagoon traffic. The locals went back to their old ways. They use sailing boats, very traditional sailing boats. We'll take some pictures later for the publication that accompanies this podcast, and they're the same boats that would've... I mean, they're fiberglass now, but they're in the same shape and form as the wooden boats that have been used for centuries in this part of the world, perhaps even Millennia, to transport themselves from the higher Guajira, as they call it, down to the middle and lower Guajira.

So we're going in Yuyo's boat. It's a wooden boat which is being retrofitted with some fiberglass around the haul to prevent leaks. But I asked Yuyo why he hasn't gone for one of the fiberglass boats there, all the boats next to his are fiberglass. And he said "because I don't want to forget the old ways." This is a very, very old wooden boat that's been in Yuyo's family and community for a long time. And the only concession to modernity is to put a bit of fiberglass on the outside so that it doesn't leak, which I'm very glad about.



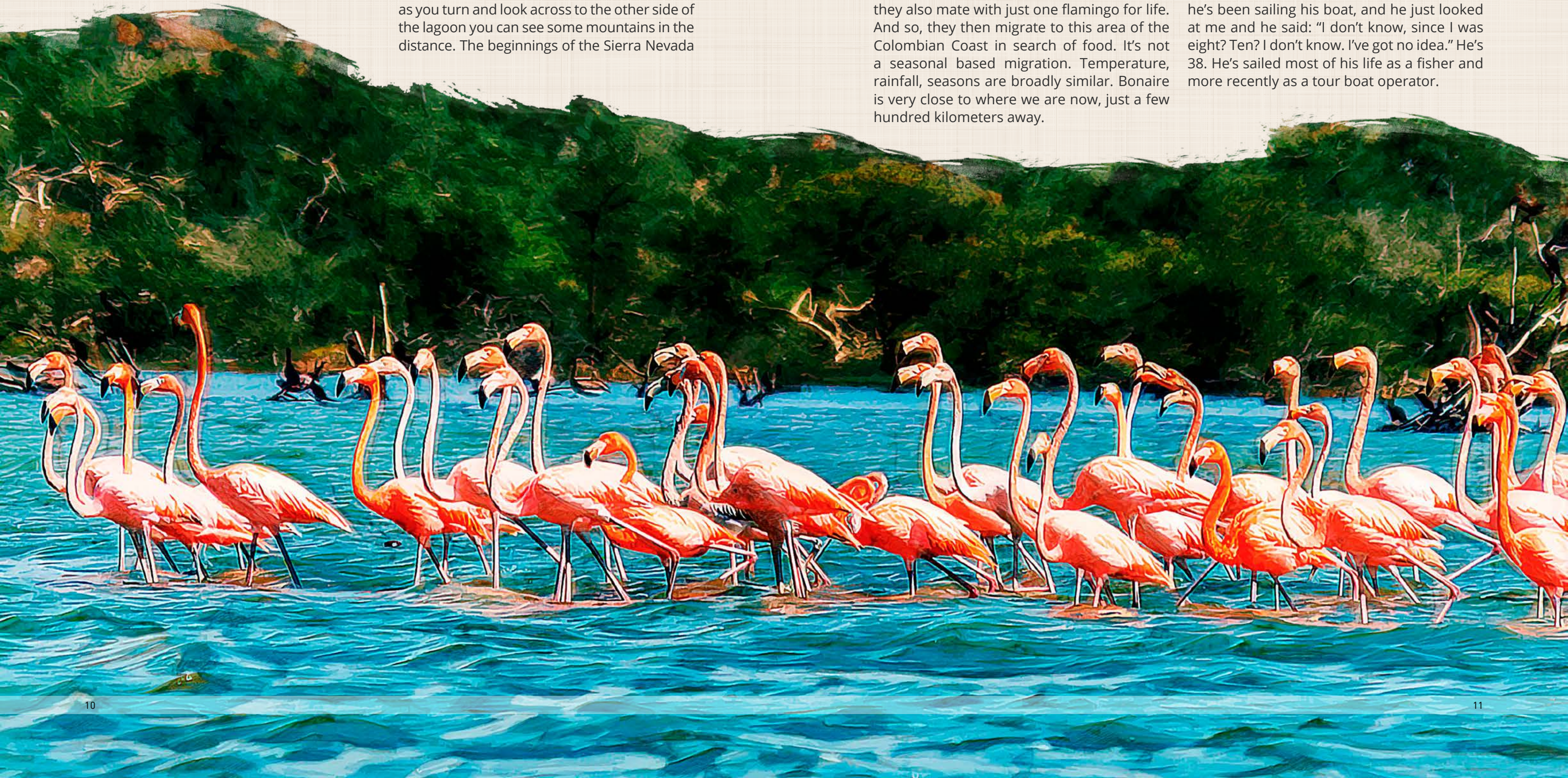
So I was just asking Javier about the history, and a little bit about the size of this lagoon. The Sanctuary itself is about 7,000 hectares in total and there are four lagoons. So this is just one of the four. They're all different sizes and have different marine life and they form part of the Colombian National Parks Network.

And Yuyo just brought us over to a big group of flamingos. I mean, apart from the fact that they are very bizarre, but somehow strangely elegant in the way they look, in the way they move; the setting is absolutely gorgeous. My God. The lagoon, that there are absolutely no hills or mountains at all on one side is completely, as far as the eye can see, flat. And as you turn and look across to the other side of the lagoon you can see some mountains in the distance. The beginnings of the Sierra Nevada

mountains, which we'll be talking about more tomorrow. My guide is an expert on the Sierra Nevada and the tracks of the Sierra Nevada. Today we're gonna focus on the flamingos.

This is really interesting. So, the flamingos, they breed and raise their young on Bonaire. They lay one egg a year, Javier tells me. And they also mate with just one flamingo for life. And so, they then migrate to this area of the Colombian Coast in search of food. It's not a seasonal based migration. Temperature, rainfall, seasons are broadly similar. Bonaire is very close to where we are now, just a few hundred kilometers away.

And now Yuyo was just telling me how his boat doubles up. So, he takes tourists out on the boat at some times of the year and other times of the year he dedicates himself almost exclusively to shrimp farming in this very same boat. And he's been... He's been sailing these waters since he can remember. He's from the local area and I asked him how long he's been sailing his boat, and he just looked at me and he said: "I don't know, since I was eight? Ten? I don't know. I've got no idea." He's 38. He's sailed most of his life as a fisher and more recently as a tour boat operator.



So, we're back on the shore, we're just gonna go and grab a bite to eat before heading off to meet Geraldine, in her local community, which is just a few minutes walk from where we are right now.

So, I was just asking Geraldine about her studies, and where she's from. She's from where we're sitting right now, from this part of the Guajira, and she's currently studying ethno-education at a nearby university. And it's really interesting because when she told... When she mentioned ethno-education and when I was talking to her before we started recording, I imagined it being around how to best provide education to the children in her community that fits in with their own cultural origins and background. And it's really interesting talking to Geraldine because she sees ethno-education as being something which is as much about how her children will be educated, as educating others on the cultural considerations of her own community, which is a really interesting way of looking at it. So, for her it works both ways: how her children deserve to be educated as well as what she's going to do to explain to others why her community follows certain traditions and cultures in the way that they do; why she is — she mentioned why she





dresses the way she does. The Guajiro women dress in these absolutely incredible, colorful dresses that are made of lots of materials; it's all about staying cool in the heat, obviously. So, she's sitting in front of me in this beautiful purple and pink dress, covered with flowers, with beautiful lace lining the sleeves and the neck of her dress. And so, you know, to her, ethno-education even includes explaining where the history of this type of clothing comes from and why it's still used.

And then meeting Geraldine and her family was interesting. Interesting to go into a traditional Wayuu village. Looks and feels very different to anything which is within my own personal experience. It's always interesting. Guajira is definitely a really interesting place. I wish I had a bit more time because the Guajira's very desolate, arid environment, has a beauty in its desolateness. Guajira, nice place. I recommend it, and I will definitely be back myself.





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