

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Córdoba

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.

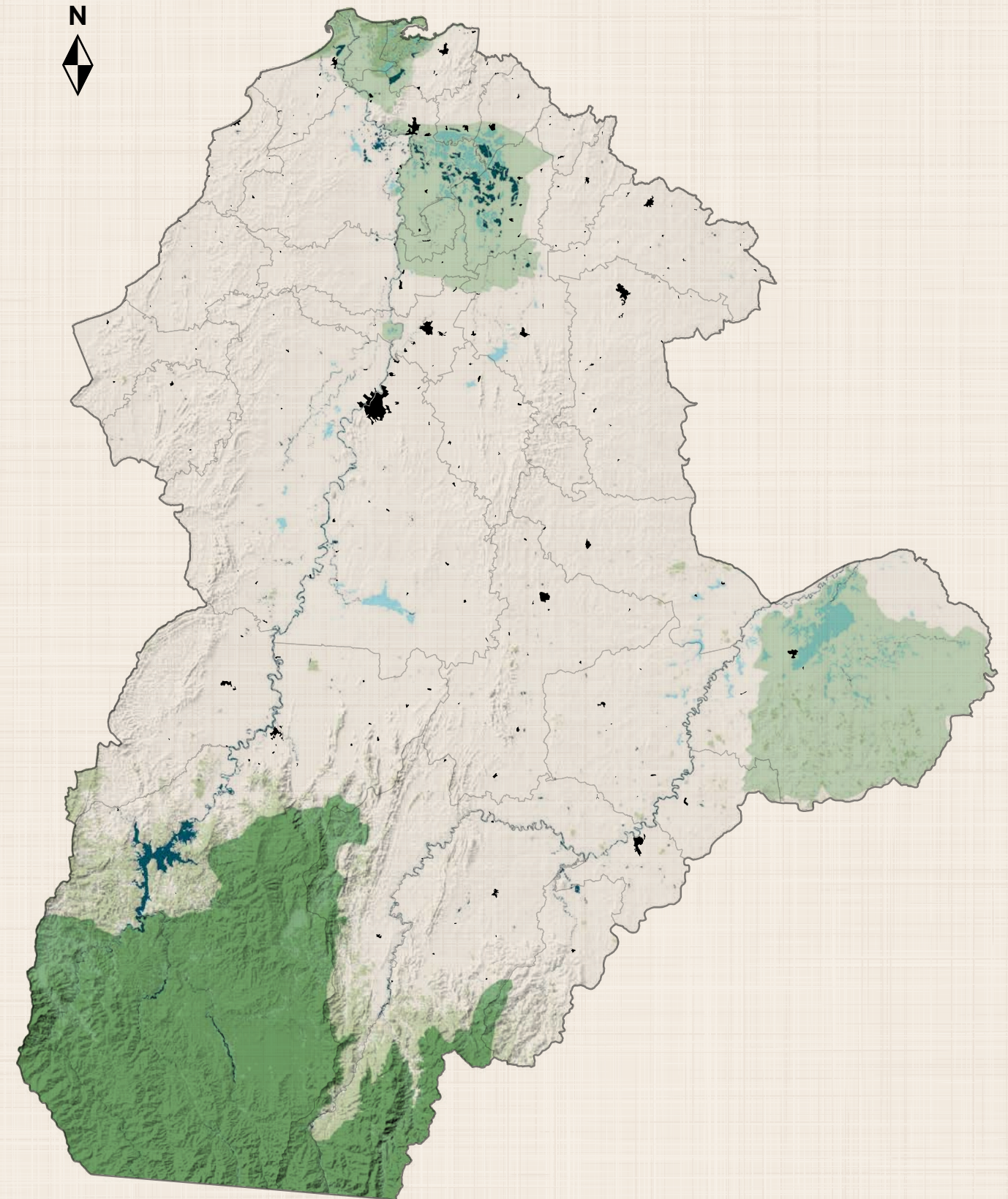
I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.

Córdoba



Today I find myself in San Pelayo, in the department of Córdoba. Córdoba is the westernmost department of what is considered to be the Colombian coast. And San Pelayo is famous for a very special type of music called 'el porro'. I won't try and describe 'el porro' myself. I'll do that with my guest. My guest is Carlos Rubio. He's director of a band called María Varilla, and he'll be talking to us

about the style of music, the tradition around the music. People dress in special costumes, there are dances. And there's also an annual festival, 'El Festival del Porro de San Pelayo', and Carlos is going to talk to us about all of those things.



So Carlos has been listening to porro his entire life. He was born in San Pelayo. He grew up in San Pelayo, and he says, literally, since he can remember... he can remember hearing the sound of bands. Bands that wandered the streets of San Pelayo until the early hours of the morning playing their instruments. So I'm going to ask him to talk a little bit more about that in a moment. I didn't realize that they were itinerant bands. And he said, from the age of 12, he joined a band. A band called María Varilla. And María Varilla is the band that he's nowadays the director of. And he said his whole life, since he was trying to... before he joined the band, he used to hear the musicians, and he thought, "one day, I am going to do this myself." "One day, I'm going to be one of those people walking around playing in the band." And he said the festival was always an inspiration to him as well. The festival, since he can remember, there's been a festival. And he said he gets just as excited today as he always has, since he was a little boy. Whenever it's festival time. And María Varilla was formed in 1988 and has been playing continuously ever since.



So I asked Carlos about what this... what he meant by hearing the bands walking down the street, crossing the street. And he said they're not actually an itinerant band. What happens is, during the festival, the porro festival here in San Pelayo, the bands arrive on the Friday of the festival. He said there's usually around 40 bands. They come from all over the country and they all get together on Friday. They meet each other. There is a music session. And then, on Saturday, 3:00 o'clock in the morning, they all meet up back exactly where we're sitting actually. They all meet up in the main square of the town, and they walk to the main stage. The festival's main stage, which is fairly close to where we are. He said it's just towards the edge of town, and they walk playing. And that's what he used to hear when he was a boy. The people... musicians walking down the street playing their wind instruments as they walked to the main stage. And then they all congregate to the main stage, and he said, it's a real site. It's absolutely incredible. He said there'll be up to 600 musicians all getting together playing their instruments together. It's an absolute... a sound wave that he said fills the village, and anybody who wasn't already awake, or who wasn't already excited, as soon as they hear the sound, wakes them up. They jump out of bed, adrenaline pumping, and everybody rushes out to go and watch the musicians go by, or to go and rush to the main stage to get ready to watch them play.

So I ask Carlos, “600 musicians? This is... that’s a lot of people.” How many people is in a typical porro band? And he said, “yeah, we’re talking, 15 to 18 people in the bands, youth bands, sort of talent incubators could have up to a 20, 23, 25 musicians. And hence when they’re here in the festival there are six hundred of them. And this whole idea of people, of them all playing together as they walk to the main stage was... came out of the first festival which was held in 1977. And in fact, the festival was actually in honor of the town’s patron saint, St. Pelayo. And in 1977, the festival was held for the first time, and somebody thought it would be a funny, great, interesting idea to have all the musicians play their instruments together. Just at one point at the beginning of the festival before the festival itself began, and ever since then it’s been a tradition.

And Carlos tells me that a typical porro band will have the following instruments: a bass drum, cymbals, the snare, clarinet, trombone, trumpet, euphonium, and a tuba. Some of them represented more than once, obviously, which makes up them 15 musicians.



So I asked Carlos about the festival and to tell us a little bit about what it involves. He said it's in the last weekend of June each year. It's four or five days of festivities. If you include the arrival of the bands. What you'll find is... you'll

find music all over town. There are obviously formal processions and other formal spaces in which you can listen to the music, but he said, basically, it's all over town. The entire town is full of musicians, they're playing on

every street corner, in every park, on every bench there'll be a musician playing, or they're practicing or playing with their band. And then you've got the main stage with the bands playing. He said it's everywhere.

I asked him, with so many musicians, and so many different instruments... I mean, it's an orchestra, basically. But I asked him to explain the structure and how the music is structured to form a cohesive whole. And he



said, “basically, porro is a conversation, so the first thing that happens is the trumpets. The trumpets ask a question, and then everybody answers in unison. Everybody starts answering the trumpets. So the whole band starts conversing. And then at some point during the conversation, the clarinets start to take a little bit more protagonism, and they begin to lead the conversation. He said “they start interjecting their own thoughts and questions.” Underneath it all you’ve got a euphonium. That’s kind of... sounds, like, a bit of a cheeky instrument within the whole. The euphonium is there constantly interjecting, adding thoughts and ideas into the process. Underpinning it all, of course, you’ve got the percussion. And then you reach the moment of climax, when it all comes together and they reach a conclusion of the conversation. And that is my very basic description of Carlos’ very poetic take on what el porro is.

So I asked Carlos to finish up by giving some practical advice for somebody who is inspired to come to the festival. He said the very first thing –he was really clear on– he said the San Pelayo Festival del Porro is characterized by being free entry. Anybody can come. He said, just make your way to the town and make your way to the main square and follow the sound of the music, basically. And so, in terms of a way you can stay, there’s a small but growing tourist infrastructure in and around San Pelayo. A lot of it based around Eco





hotels, which are being built on cattle farms. There's a huge amount of cattle ranching in this local area. And also in people's homes. People will build... very simple, he said really comfortable. And with great family hospitality. People will build very simple lodgings in their back gardens, effectively, sort of banana leaf roofed, temporary dwellings for people who come to the festival. He said, you know, it's not five star, but you'll be very comfortable and you'll be very well received by the family. So there's plenty of places to stay and you can enjoy the festival without having to pay an entry fee.

From what he says, a lot of the festival, most of the festival happens outside in the streets in the town's square, in the streets and in people's back gardens, and Colombia being Colombia, they will not let you walk by without pulling you in and asking you to dance. Or to share a drink, or at the very least, just to sit and listen. So, come along to San Pelayo. I know I'm going to come back next year.



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