

# STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Guainía



## Stories from the Heart of Colombia A podcast by Procolombia

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**Photo 4:** Duarte, Julio (Photographer). *The Guainía River (in Colombia) is a long Amazon river, the largest of all tributaries of the Amazon River and the longest on its left bank, accompanied by canoes surrounded by nature and forests*. [imagen digital]. Extradited from <https://www.shutterstock.com/es/image-photo/river-colombia-long-amazon-largest-all-1379769044>

**Photo 5:** Sebek, Vaclav (Photographer). *The big and amazing mountain of Mavicure, Pajarito (Little Bird)*. [imagen digital]. Extradited from <https://www.shutterstock.com/es/image-photo/colombia-big-amazing-mountain-mavicure-pajarito-1570143547>

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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.

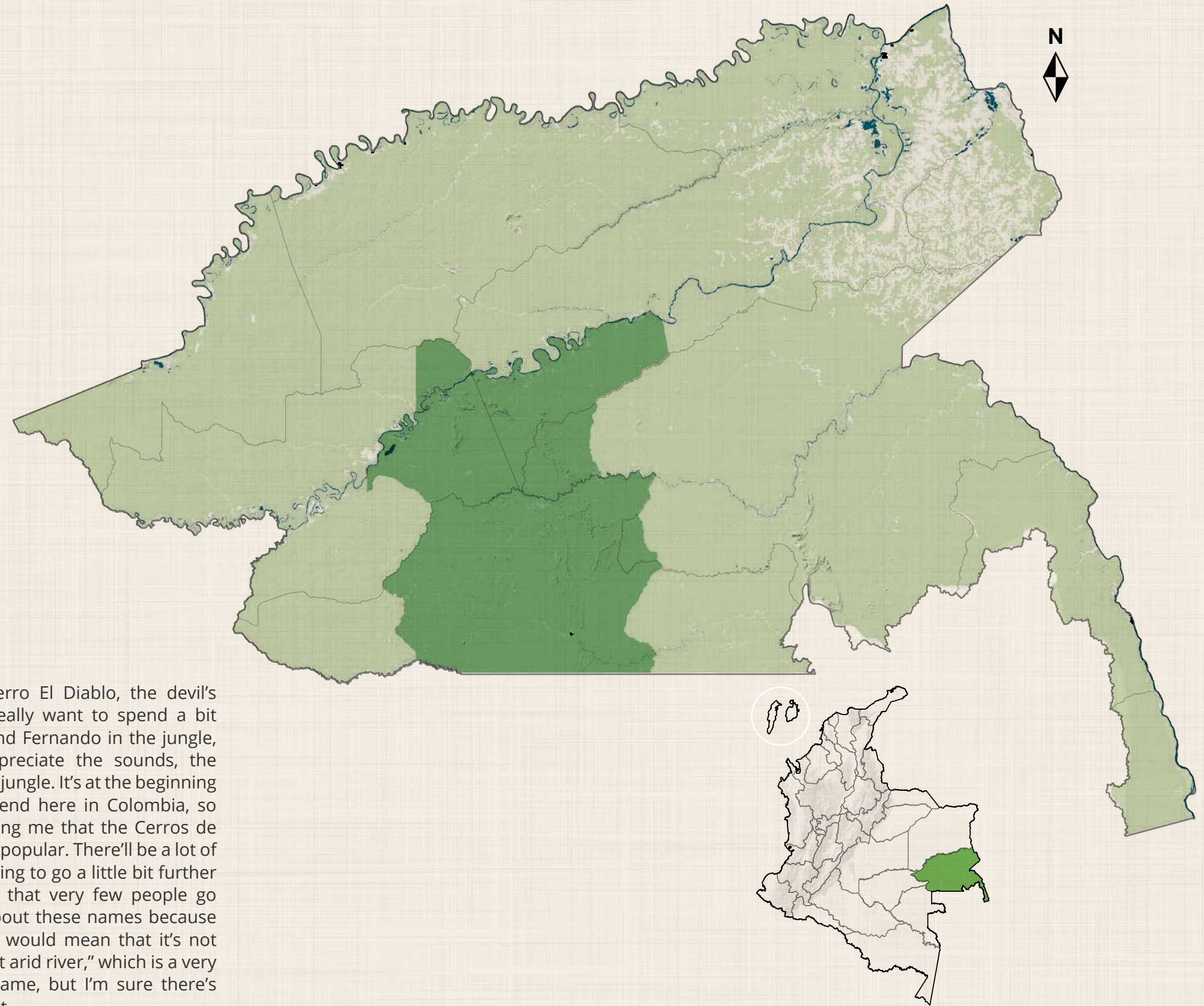
I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.



# Guainía

And so after a night sleeping in my own bed, which is always nice, I find myself once again in Bogotá's El Dorado airport waiting for a flight to a magical place in Colombia. Today I'm going to the Department of Guainía, most specifically landing in the very poetic sounding Puerto Inírida. On the banks of the Inírida river and in Guainía, I'm going to be meeting my guide Fernando, a biologist, actually from Bogotá, who located in Puerto Inírida a number of years ago. And we're going to go up the river and take a boat, the two of us. And we're going to go first to the Cerro de Mavecure, which is a mythical set of Tapuyes rising up out of the jungle, about 50 kilometers from Puerto Inírida. I mean, absolutely spectacular sight, and I'm really looking forward to going with a biologist who's going to be able to explain better to us these changing ecosystems that you find on the jungle floor and then on the top of the Tapuyes because they're high enough to actually have a different climate. And then we're going to go on to a very poetic sounding

place, which is Cerro El Diablo, the devil's peak, because I really want to spend a bit of time, just me and Fernando in the jungle, being able to appreciate the sounds, the atmosphere of the jungle. It's at the beginning of a holiday weekend here in Colombia, so Fernando was telling me that the Cerros de Mavecure are very popular. There'll be a lot of hikers. So we're going to go a little bit further on to somewhere that very few people go and finding out about these names because in Spanish, Inírida would mean that it's not dry, it's like the "not arid river," which is a very poetic sounding name, but I'm sure there's more to it than that.







So yeah. Off we go.

**Fernando:** Nick, bienvenido al departamento de Guainía. Es uno de los...

So Fernando tells me we're going to be going upriver. He said, really, what we need to look out for is the vegetation. The changing vegetation, we'll be going past some different small communities. There won't be too much river life. He said there's a lot of traffic on

these rivers, so the local fauna tends to stay away from the rivers. But there is one point where we're going to stop, which is where we should be able to see some of the pink dolphins, the freshwater dolphins. And I asked Fernando if these were the same species of dolphins that I would have seen further down river in Puerto Carreño recently, because he called them Amazon Dolphins. And that's not what they call them when you're in Puerto Carreño. And he said, "yeah, it's the same

species." And interestingly, I didn't realize this. There's actually a waterway that links the Amazon and Orinoco River Systems, and that is why we've got the same freshwater pink dolphins in these waters as you'll find in the Amazon, which is really interesting. I just asked Fernando about access, because as far as I'm aware, this really is a department where the access routes are waterways. And he said, "yep, it's exactly that." There's no road access into this Department of Guainía at all.

So part of the beauty of the ecosystems we're going to be going through and talking about today is precisely the fact that you can only visit them by river. So we're on the river.

—Let's go. Vámonos.

**Fernando:** Hemos hecho un recorrido de dos horas. Son ciento sesenta kilómetros de distancia, en línea recta de Inírida...



And so, finally, after an uneventful two hour journey upriver. We've reached a point where we can see the mythical Cerros de Mavecure, and they really are absolutely incredible. There are three of them, they are these huge rock outcrops that tower up above the jungle, the tallest of them is around about 700 meters high. So they really are quite impressive structures and the three are called Cerro Mavecure, Cerro Mono and Cerro Pajarito. Cerro Pajarito is the tallest of them, 700 meters tall. Cerro Mono is the second tallest and Cerro Mavecure is the smallest. Mavecure is the one that Fernando tells me people usually choose to climb because the slopes are less steep and it's a less demanding climb for people who are not used to a lot of physical activity. So me being me, I told him, I want to go to Cerro Pajarito. Anyway, before we do that, he told me that there are two local indigenous communities there. Interestingly, they are multi-ethnic communities, so a number of different indigenous ethnic groups have come together to form villages. They're called El Remanso and El Venado, and we're going to go and have lunch in El Remanso, and meet the local people there.





So we just pulled in to the base of Cerro Pajarito. And so I asked I wanted to actually get off the boat. Apart from the fact I wanted to get off the boat, I wanted to get off the boat and actually stand on this ancient hundreds of millions of years old structure. And this we got off. Fernando came along with me, and then he starts talking with so much passion about the little mini forest on the top of the first peak that you can actually get to walking. I said, "well, are we allowed to walk up here?" And he said, "yeah, sure, none of this is off limits." So I asked him, if he'd take me up to this place. Well, I asked him if it was somewhere meaningful to him. And he said "yes", with a look on his face of absolute wonder. So I'm really looking forward to getting up to this place, which is obviously very special to Fernando, and I'm going to stop recording for now because it's bloody steep.

So we're going up toward what Fernando calls a gallery forest, but it's basically a point at which the slopes lessen and the granite flattens off a bit and it allows trees to take root because here they can't. We're just walking up here, a granite slab. But it's steep. I'm probably looking at a 50 60 percent gradient, something like that. I'm going to stop recording or I'm going to fall over.



So what we're looking at is a typical landscape of the northeast Amazon, Fernando tells me. The color is coming from a tree actually called the Moracea. It's in-season at the moment, it's flowering, which also means that lots of bees and other insects come and pollinate the flowers, which hopefully means we're going to be able to try some nice honey later. And Fernando's going to take me to meet a friend of his who produces honey.

I'm surrounded by these little, Fernando tells me, they're little bees. So I'm going to ask him, actually on tape, to explain what they are.

**Fernando:** ...polinizadores empiezan a generar esa dispersión...

I mean, if I translate directly from Spanish, it's a pretty wild name. Fernando tells me that commonly they're called the Lameojos, which is literally the eye-leaking bee, tiny little bees. They don't have stings and they're after the salt, like every living organism. Fernando tells me they need salt and we're a great source of salt. So as soon as I turn up sweating like I am in this jungle heat, it's a real banquet for these little bees

So Fabio is, like I said, is the leader of this community association. There's 34 families of different indigenous ethnic backgrounds, and they've... a lot of them, not all of them, but a number of them have come together to form



this initiative based around honey. And he said they were fortunate to count on the help of foreign foundation, the Ricola Foundation from Switzerland to help them get the project started. But he's very proud that for the past three years they've been completely independent.

And so after that amazing hike up El Pajarito, followed by lunch in El Remanso. I'm going to head off back down river towards the community of La Ceiba, where I'm going to meet one of the community leaders, Fabio Pérez, who I'm really looking forward to talking to about a really interesting sounding project, which is as much about local commerce as it is about tourism.

**Fabio:** Mi nombre es Fabio Pérez, soy indígena curripako, habitante del resguardo indígena Almidón La Ceiba y Comunidad La Ceiba...

So I ask Fabio about the process of, you know, whether the bees was something they always knew about, whether they'd always used their honey. And said, "yeah, of course." "I mean, you know, they live in our jungle." They're endemic to this jungle. There are seven different varieties, seven different species. And he said, "we always used them. The only thing was we didn't look at the honey as something that we could sell. It was something that we would use as a natural medicine." And he said, "yeah," I mean, it's just something they've always known about. Their hives are up in the trees. They discovered them by walking around at night and just listening because the jungle's quieter. So they just walked around listening to the buzz of the bees. And then you would find the hive, extract the honey and use it for medicinal purposes in the community. So I asked Fabio what came first, whether the community decided to use



this beautiful natural resource that they have, which is natural bee honey and then develop a tourism package, or whether tourism came first and they were looking for something to bring the tourists to their community. And he said, "being completely honest, the tourism came first." Tourists were coming to the area and the community started looking around and thinking, "You know, what have we got of our own, that's unique to us that we can use to bring tourists here?", and the natural thing that came to them was the honey. So they began to cultivate the bees in a more commercial sense and produce the honey.

**Fabio:** Realmente, a nosotros aquí en la comunidad, nos ha cambiado la vida...

So I asked Fabio to talk a little bit about the benefits, the positive changes that tourism has brought to his community. And he said it's been fantastic for them what they chose to do. And it's so often the case with these very tight knit communities is that all the income goes into a central community pool. There's no one person who draws a salary from the income or goes into a central pool for the community and the community together at their meetings decide where to spend the money. So whether people are working with the bees or whether they're not working with the bees, the fact that they're allowing tourists to come into their community means that everybody gets to benefit from the funds which are collected from tourism.

**Fabio:** Sí, anteriormente nos tocaba cargar el agua, y ahoritica, pues ya nos queda más fácil, pues llega a la puerta...





That's a fantastic example of tourism having a positive effect on a local community. I asked Fabio just to give us an example of something specific, something concrete that they've done with the income from tourism they didn't have before. And he said, "well, our water." And I said, "what do you mean?" We're a little bit separated from the river. It's about, I mean, it's only about a five minute walk, but they were having to carry their water. So, you know, five minute walk in this heat without any water on your shoulders is, you know, you're sweating by the time you get here. They were going down to the river, filling up tanks and bottles of water and having to carry them back on their shoulders all the way back into the village. And he said, "especially for the older members of the community, it was really difficult." And also, you know, they bathe in the river. So to go down to the river and bathe. And he said, "so we used some of the income from tourism. We bought a pump and piping," and they now have running water in their homes, which is fantastic.

**Fabio:** ...unos contactos que se pueden comunicar conmigo, a mi teléfono...

So the very last thing Fabio said was, if you want to come and stay with him, they'd love to have you to stay with the community La Ceiba, in the Department of Guainía. He said really, the best way to get hold of him is through Aroma Verde, which is Fernando's foundation. That's Aroma Verde, green in Spanish, Aroma Verde. If you search for that, they have their Facebook page and Instagram. And you can get hold of them and come down here to the Ceiba, have some delicious honey and be contributing to the local community.





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