

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Nariño

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.

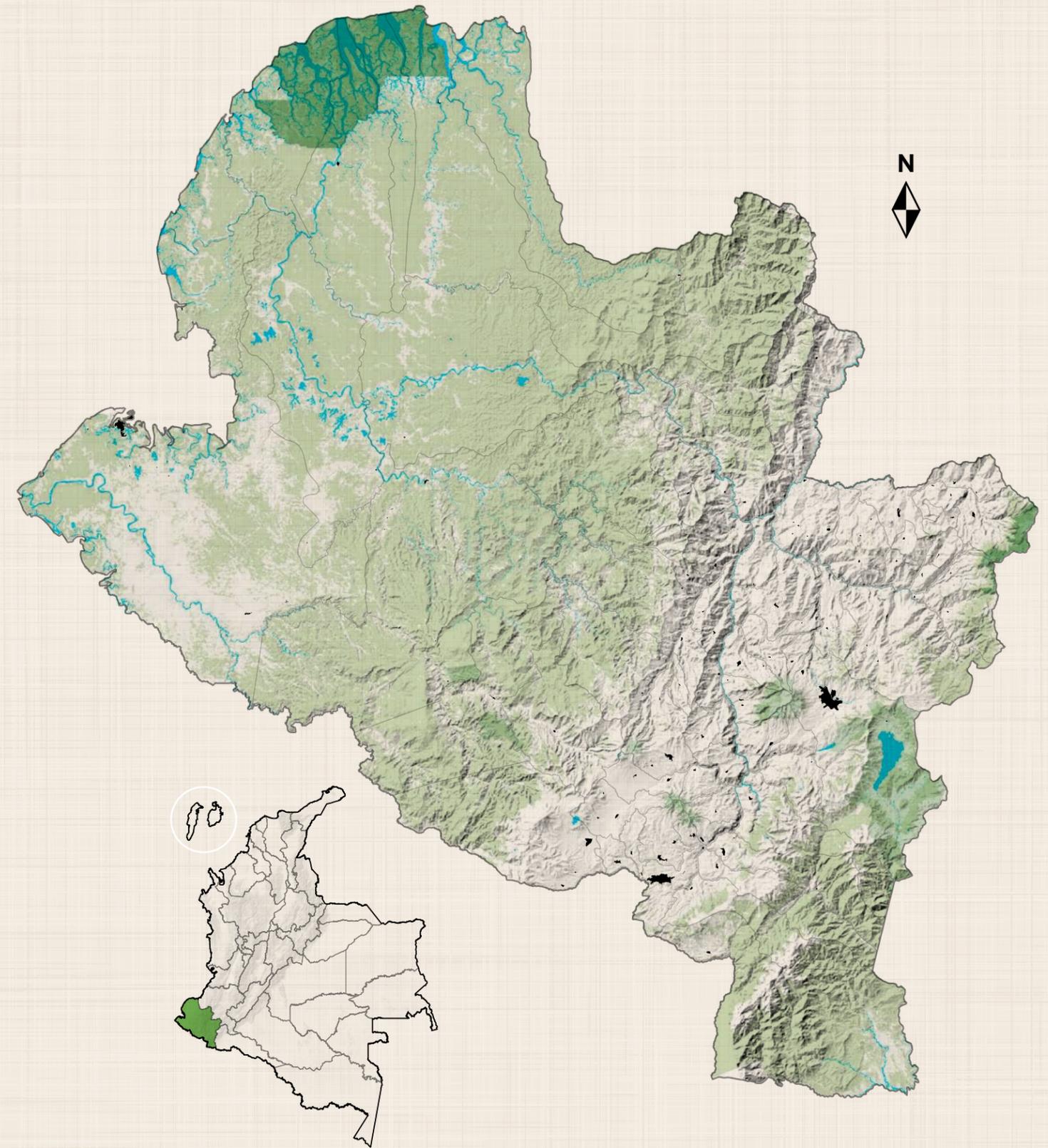
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Nariño

In today's episode of the podcast I find myself in Nariño, right down in the south of Colombia. I flew this morning into Pasto Airport —well, they call it Pasto Airport, but it's actually about 20 or 30 kilometers outside Pasto, down a mountain. So, I picked up a car, drove up the mountain right around the edge of Pasto— beautiful view of the city, actually as you come around the ring road —with the city laid out below you, lovely looking city sitting amongst the mountains of southern Colombia. And then I drove up over another mountain towards La Laguna de La Cocha. I'll be meeting my guides— I'm meeting three people today, some very interesting: a tour operator, a couple of tour operators, actually; and a biologist, who are going to explain the surrounding landscapes and ecosystem and flora and fauna to be found. La Laguna de La Cocha has a mythical status amongst travelers in southern Colombia. It's a gorgeous lake ringed by incredibly tall mountains and lots of páramo ecosystems with frailejón plants, and it's just absolutely gorgeous. I'm really looking forward to having a walk around the lake with my guides and finding out some more opportunities, I want to come back. I've ridden past this area on my bike before, but

I've never actually stopped here. And it's one of must—come—to places in the cycle touring community, as well as of other travelers too. I think it's worth mentioning as well that the climate in this part of the country, because of the mountains, is incredibly variable and very unpredictable. So, apparently, it's been fairly clear most mornings —it's around about close to half past 10 in the morning when I'm making this recording— and I can see some really dark clouds rolling in over the nearby mountains. So, we'll see what happens. We might get a little bit wet today and, as any traveler to this region should do, I've brought with me my waterproofs and a change of clothes just in case. That's it, Laguna de La Cocha. I'm just arriving in a little town called El Encano where I'm gonna meet my guides, and I will be back in a while once we're actually walking around the lake.



So, I met a few minutes ago with Jaime, Jesús and Eliana, who are gonna be our guests on today's show.

Eliana tells me that she's a biologist by trade, and she's also a tour guide, and she loves nature. She loves anything to do with conservation. But what really moves her is meeting new people and visiting new places. We start walking whilst I ask her and she tells me why she chose this particular place as our destination in the department of Nariño, and she tells me she really wanted to bring me to the high Andean ecosystem as she wanted to walk through the fields of frailejones with me. And the reason that she wants to do this is because there's a very peculiar characteristic of La Cocha, which is the low páramo ecosystems. And the low páramo ecosystem is basically any páramo which is below 3,000 meters above sea level. Apparently it's quite unusual to find páramo ecosystems and the flora and fauna which are unique to the páramo at below 3,000 meters, but that's what we find here. And she also tells me that this is a place that's visited by a lot of migratory birds, especially aquatic migratory birds because of the lake, and this is the time that we have a lot of migration. We're at the change of seasons in the north, and La Cocha is a perfect resting place on birds' journeys from north to south or vice versa. She also tells me that La Cocha is a Ramsar wetland, which is obviously of international importance, and that it was designated as a Ramsar wetland because of the conservation efforts around local flora and fauna.



And now I'm with Jaime López; Jaime, who was kind enough to help us to organize this particular trip and put us together with Eliana and with Jesús as well. He's a tour operator, he runs a tour business based in Pasto, but they take people all over southern Colombia and further afield, which he'll tell us about a little bit later. So I asked Jaime why he'd chosen to bring me here first, and he said it's a really strategic point for Nariño, geologically and geographically, because the point where we're at now—to simplify things enormously—but, basically we're on the mountain which divides east from west in this part of the continent and is part of Colombia. If we go west from here, basically we go down and the water systems all run down and eventually run out into the Pacific; if we go east from here everything runs down and eventually reaches the Atlantic. So it really is a key point. It's like a dividing point in the Colombian eco and water systems.

Jesús is an industrial engineer by trade and he's also studied Regional Planning and Project Management. But he says that today he has the honor of being a simple storyteller. And his objective is to get people to fall in love with austral Colombia, southern Colombia, deep Colombia; unknown Colombia, as he says. And as Jesús and I continue talking about life, the world and everything related to Nariño and the particular area we're in, we reach the topic of linguistic mal—appropriation, and Jesús tells me that actually this lake is not called "La Cocha" and it's definitely not called





"La Laguna de La Cocha." 'Cocha' in quechua, he tells me, means 'a body of water'. And so, what must have happened was, when the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived, somebody at some point looked at the lake or pointed at the lake and said 'la cocha', but what they were saying is 'that's a body of water'. But, whoever it was who originally heard them thought that they were saying the name of the lake and so they then called it "La Laguna de La Cocha." But in actual fact what you're

saying there is 'the lake lake'. And in fact, 'La Cocha' has nothing to do with the actual name of the lake, anyway. The lake's actually called "Guamués" because it was named after the river Guamués which flows into the lake. And the river Guamués was named after a local Chief who existed here many hundreds, thousands of years ago—that part has been lost in history— but Jesús is emphatic in telling me we should just say 'La Cocha', so that at least we're not repeating words.

Because of its isolated nature, the lake is a safe haven for a huge amount of bird and animal life and, according to Eliana, one of the principal attractions of this particular area of Nariño is nature tourism—birdwatching, trekking. There are multiple trekking opportunities around the lake: long trails, short trails, difficult trails, easy trails, and there's a huge concentration of biodiversity. So there's actually an island in the lake, it's only 2 hectares in surface area, and it has 54 different bird species living on it. Just in this

tiny little area. So it really, it's a place to come to connect with nature effectively.

So Eliana is telling me about a number of different walking opportunities. Really the lake is a place to come and 'recharge your batteries'. It's a place to come and recover energy, lost energy, and receive the energy of the lake and the surrounding area. And, according to Eliana, there's something for everybody. I mean, from a 500 meter trail, where you'll encounter multiple animal



species and birds just within one short half-kilometer walk. Up to much more demanding walks up into the páramo ecosystems and up some of the mounts, surrounding mountains, which are multiple hour walks and, that's where you start getting to the more unique, especially bird species where you'll find them isolated, unique species in isolated areas at the end of long trails.

So when I asked Jaime about sort of wider Nariño and other tourism opportunities, the first two places he mentions: one is intangible and the other one is tangible. The tangible one is the Las Lajas Sanctuary, so he said that's such one place you've got to go; and the other thing that Jaime mentioned was the Black and White Festival in Pasto, which has been designated intangible cultural heritage,

but as soon as I started to ask him about it he said not, you've got to ask Jesús. Jesús is a storyteller and historian. So, I'm going to find Jesús and ask him to tell me a little bit more about the Black and White Festival.

The Black and White Carnival in Pasto dates back to Colonial times and Jesús was telling me that it's a... It's a celebration of culture, of all of the different cultures that came together in Colonial times. So, it's a celebration of the art forms that were brought over from Europe by the white colonizers; a celebration of the art forms that were brought from Africa by the slaves; and a celebration of the art forms that already existed here and that had existed for thousands of years in indigenous communities. It's a street festival, he said; you don't need to spend a penny—to find somewhere to sleep, I suppose—but you don't need to spend any money to come to the Pasto Carnival. He said of course, I mean, there are events, there are all sorts of things going on. But if you just want to come and enjoy the peace and harmony, as Jesús puts it, of the Carnival, you just do that walking the streets of Pasto.





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