

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Antioquia

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.

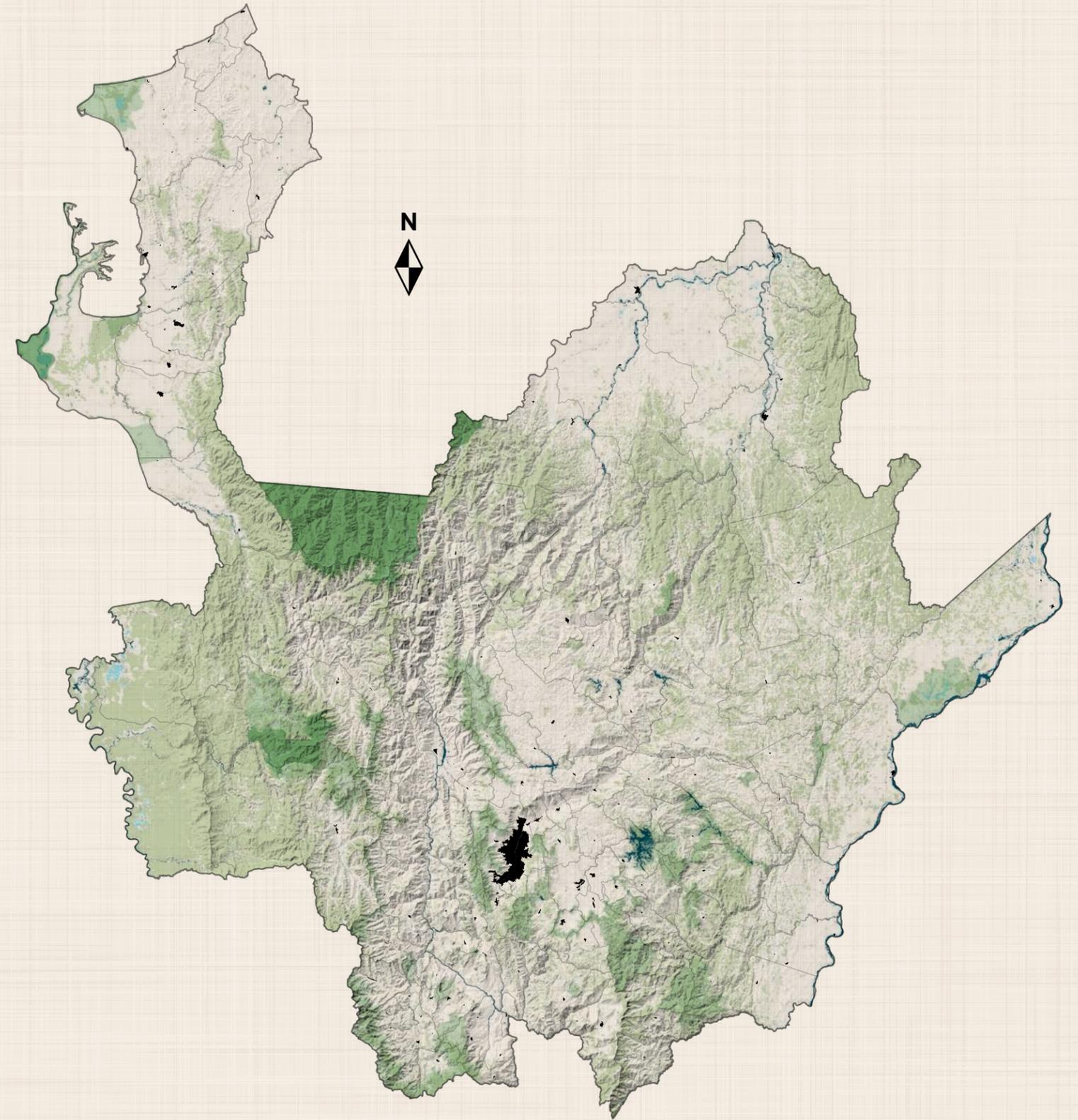
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Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Antioquia

I find myself in the department of Antioquia, most specifically in the city of Medellín. Antioquia is a beautiful mountainous department in North Western Colombia, and it's got a huge amount to offer. What I've decided to do here actually is stay within the city of Medellín, and go and visit one of Medellín's iconic neighborhoods, La Comuna 13, which until recently or fairly recently was largely inaccessible to anybody except locals for a number of different reasons. And in recent years, it's really re-invented itself as a tourism destination to go and look at the local graffiti, which I'll find more about when I go and meet my guy, John Stephen. Just about to leave my hotel, go off and jump on the metro, head up to the north of the city where I'm going to meet John Stephen and talk about graffiti and the re-invention of a neighborhood. The opportunities that tourism has brought for young people and everybody in the neighborhood.



So I just met John, really nice guy, really friendly, and he seems really enthusiastic about showing me around his neighborhood. He explained we're in Comuna 13. Medellín is divided into what they call Comunas, which are larger administrative areas. And each Comuna is then divided into its neighborhoods. And interestingly, he said, "welcome to Comuna 13." And I looked at him, and I said, "we're in Comuna 13?" And he said, "we're in Comuna 13?" because you have this image of Comuna 13 being a neighborhood on the side of the mountain, you know, the poor neighborhoods kind of climbing the side of these steep mountains. But he said, "no, this is where Comuna 13 begins." Indeed, it does go up the steep mountain, which is where we're going to go in a moment on the cable car, which is a continuation of the Medellín Metro. And that's when we'll get into what it's more sort of visually recognizable Comuna 13. But for now, we're in the metro station and John is just explaining what we're going to be doing today. We're going to all sorts of different parts of his neighborhood to check out the graffiti. That's the objective of this trip. It sounds like it's going to be a great day.

So, John's a local resident, he's lived in Comuna 13 almost all his life, and for the last five years, his full time job has been doing tours around Comuna 13. So I asked John what it was about Comuna 13 and when it was that it started to become such a famous place for talent in street art in Colombia. And he said, "first of all, something to be clear about is it's not just talent in street art, as in graffiti, it's also the culture all around hip hop culture, which includes the music, obviously break dancers in the MCs." And he said, "this really comes out of mid-nineties in Comuna 13." Things were bad. "Things were really rough," he said. Young kids in Comuna 13, I mean, the only way they could find to release some of the stress they were feeling about all of the bad things around them was either through art or through music. So making the music,

writing the raps or painting the walls with their discontent or whatever it was that they wanted to say was really their only outlet.

So I've got to say this urban cable car, it's absolutely stunning. I mean, I've been to Medellín many times for work, but never



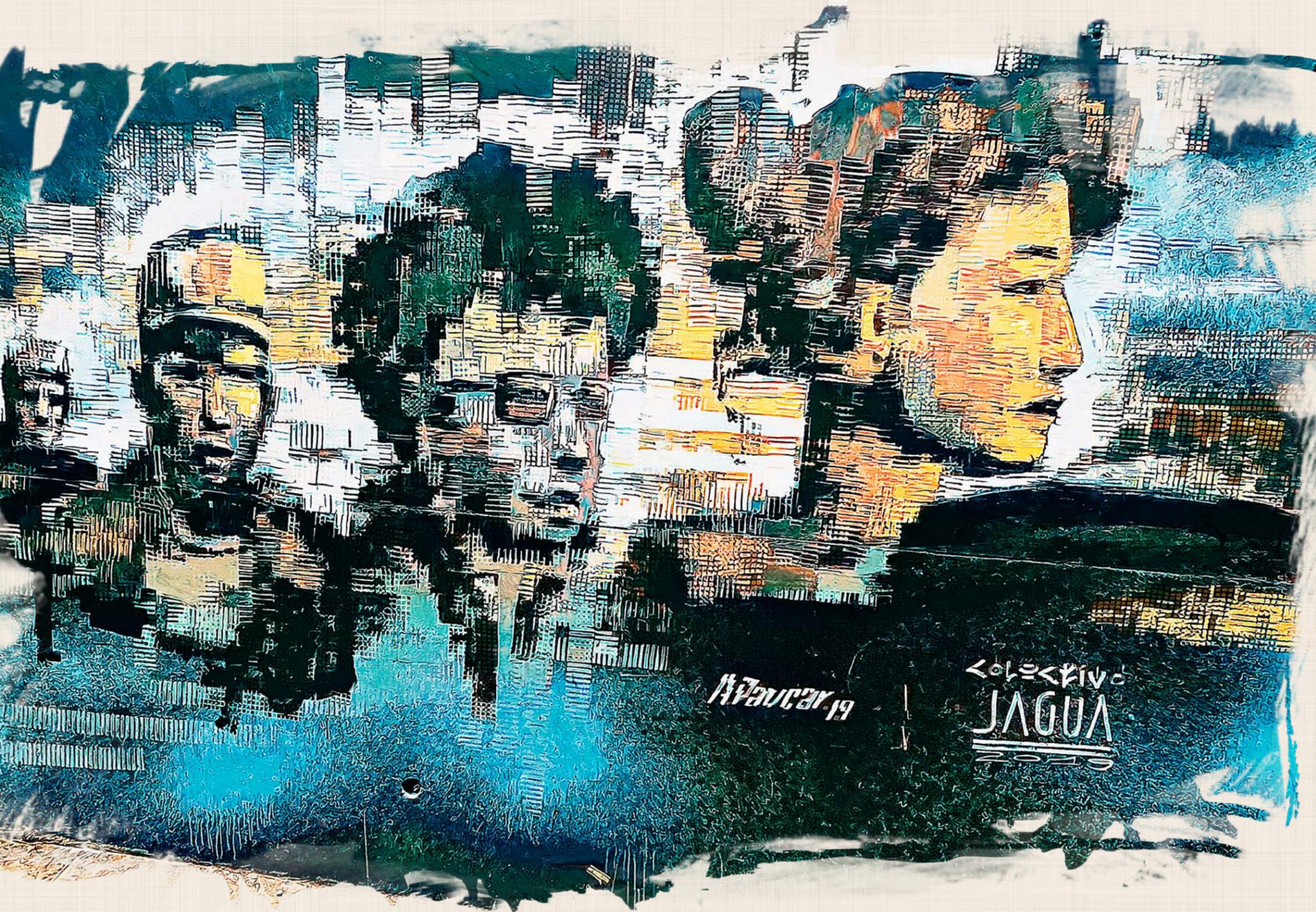
had time to come and actually check this out. Everyone always says you should check out the cable car. And I was like, “yeah, yeah, whatever. You know, it’s just a cable car.” But it’s actually incredibly impressive.

You rise up from... Medellín is quite a flat city set along a valley between mountain ranges. So you’re on sort of the level of the valley floor and then you get into the cable car and it immediately starts rising, and you start rising up and now you’re in. All of a sudden you look around and you can see what you would classically consider to be a neighborhood like Comuna 13. Houses and houses and houses built up the side of this incredibly steep slope, with stairs going up between the houses. There’s very few roads. There’s just one road I can see over to my left at the moment, but everything else is narrow stairways going up between houses, sort of up this labyrinth of paths between the houses. And as we come up through the neighborhood, we’re sort of floating above the roofs of all of the houses, so you get a real sense of the dimension of the neighborhood.

And that was what John was just telling me about as we spent our first few minutes in the cable car, because I asked him at what point and how does this transition begin? And he said, “a lot of it was around this time around, sort of at the end of the ‘90s,” around the time he said, the street art scene, the hip hop scene began here.

The government began initiatives to help people start to feel more part of Medellín. And really, he was talking mostly in the last sort of 10 to 15 years. The government began to look for ways of connecting this outlying and forgotten municipality to Medellín, so people didn’t feel so abandoned and isolated. And alongside the infrastructure initiatives went other initiatives. So new schools being built. Lots of social organizations came into the neighborhood and started working with victims of domestic





violence, for example. And really helping people feel that they were worthy, valid members of society, which they'd never been made to feel before, and giving them an opportunity as well to learn skills and develop toolkits that would enable them to rise out of the poverty that they found themselves in. And all of this comes together in a situation we're in today where John can quite happily... I spoke to him on the phone this morning and I said, "you know, is it cool for me to bring my recorder and my camera with me and just wander around?" And he said, "yeah, it's absolutely fine." And so that, in his words, just now in Spanish was where we are today. All of this has come together to bring us to a situation where a foreigner to Colombia, like myself and a foreigner to Comuna 13, can quite happily and safely come and walk around this neighborhood.

So I asked John about how this tourist boom in Comuna 13 had begun. And finally, it was about... it actually started with the Colombian global superstar Juanes and his charity foundation. He was doing a lot of work around here. And he brought an American Politician, John says, to visit the local neighborhood where all this work was being done. They ended up spending eight hours walking around the neighborhood, and this person he brought with him was just blown away by the local graffiti art. And they'd also launched a competition, as it were, for local talent to come and present their talent, whatever it was, to this politician, and only two people applied, so they were both chosen. One was a graffiti artist, the other was a rapper. And then they started working together, actually, because they, I mean, obviously told the story of the neighborhood to this politician, and they start working together and end up starting a business called Graffitour, which was to take people around the neighborhood. It actually is a specific activity to come and look at the graffiti. And then it snowballed from there to the situation we're in today, where it's still not a good idea to come up here on your own. But you could conceivably

just jump on a metro and come up on the cable car and just have a wander around on your own in this nice, slightly cooler neighborhood as well, because we're much higher up than Medellín.

If you really want to see the true street art graffiti in this neighborhood, you've got to walk these little alleyways that we're walking now. There's myriad labyrinthine series of alleyways and stairways and weaving in and out of the houses. No roads. You can hear motorbikes, but they're literally riding up walkways up to people's houses. He said, "you've got to walk these alleyways because this is where you find the real graffiti." There've been a number of graffiti fairs which have been held in Comuna 13 over the years. And when the fairs are on the artists, they just come out into the neighborhood, find an empty wall and paint it. And literally, I mean, we just stopped on a random corner. I can see over in the distance, there's a sort of photorealistic drawing that looks like some little Antioquia in country town. There's a representation of farmers. Farmers telling the fields on another house, literally right next to it is a really classic, huge 3D tag. If I turn around to my left, to the geometric pattern triangles painted onto the house on my left, and this is just literally on a random street corner, it is absolutely incredible. This neighborhood is just full of art. So what John's saying is like, "if you really want to get a flavor of the true street art, try and leave the tourist trail." I mean, I'd recommend going with a guy like John because he really knows his stuff.

He knows the people. He knows where we can walk and where we should be careful. But he said, "if you can, if you've got time, there's a tourist route," which he said is lovely. Really nice. You've got murals and the arts are a lot more sort of polished and professional. But then once you leave the tourist trail and you wander out into the labyrinth of alleyways in the barrio, it's where you're really going to see the true art that's coming out of this neighborhood. And it really is a sight to behold.





As we get towards the end of our tour around Comuna 13, which John has been at pains to point out, is not just the graffiti tour. I've already seen it as a graffiti tour because I love graffiti. To him, it's a tour of his neighborhood. It's a way of showing people that its bad name should now be left in the past where it belongs, where it was earned, justifiably. But now they've gone past that and it's really a tour of change and hope. And so I asked John, we've just walked down this... What he called... They call it El Viaducto. It's like a viaduct, which is effectively... it's a new construction and all along the viaduct as we walked up here. There are businesses selling reproductions of graffiti.

There are drink stalls, fruit juice stalls, ice cream stores, all sorts of businesses. And I asked him how many of these businesses existed before the neighborhood became a tourist destination. And he looked at me, and he said, "honestly?", and I said, "yeah, honestly, I really want to know this." And he said, "almost none; less than 10 percent." So 90 percent of the businesses that we've passed walking through the neighborhood, and there's one on every single block, if not more, three, four, five. And along this viaduct there, you know, it's just wall-to-wall businesses and souvenir stalls and everything you can possibly imagine in a tourist area. 90 percent of them are thanks to tourism, and are generating legitimate, honest, safe income for the residents of the neighborhood. And then people like John and his colleagues, who found safe, sustainable income as tour guides, which is something they never would have been able to think about before. So it's really interesting what tourism has brought to this neighborhood, and it's a great place to visit as a tourist. It's fantastic, but every single peso that you spend here is having a direct positive benefit on the inhabitants of the neighborhood where you're walking. Because the guides are from the neighborhood, the store owners are from the neighborhood and it's a great place to come. It's beautiful, really interesting. Very different.



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