

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Caquetá

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.

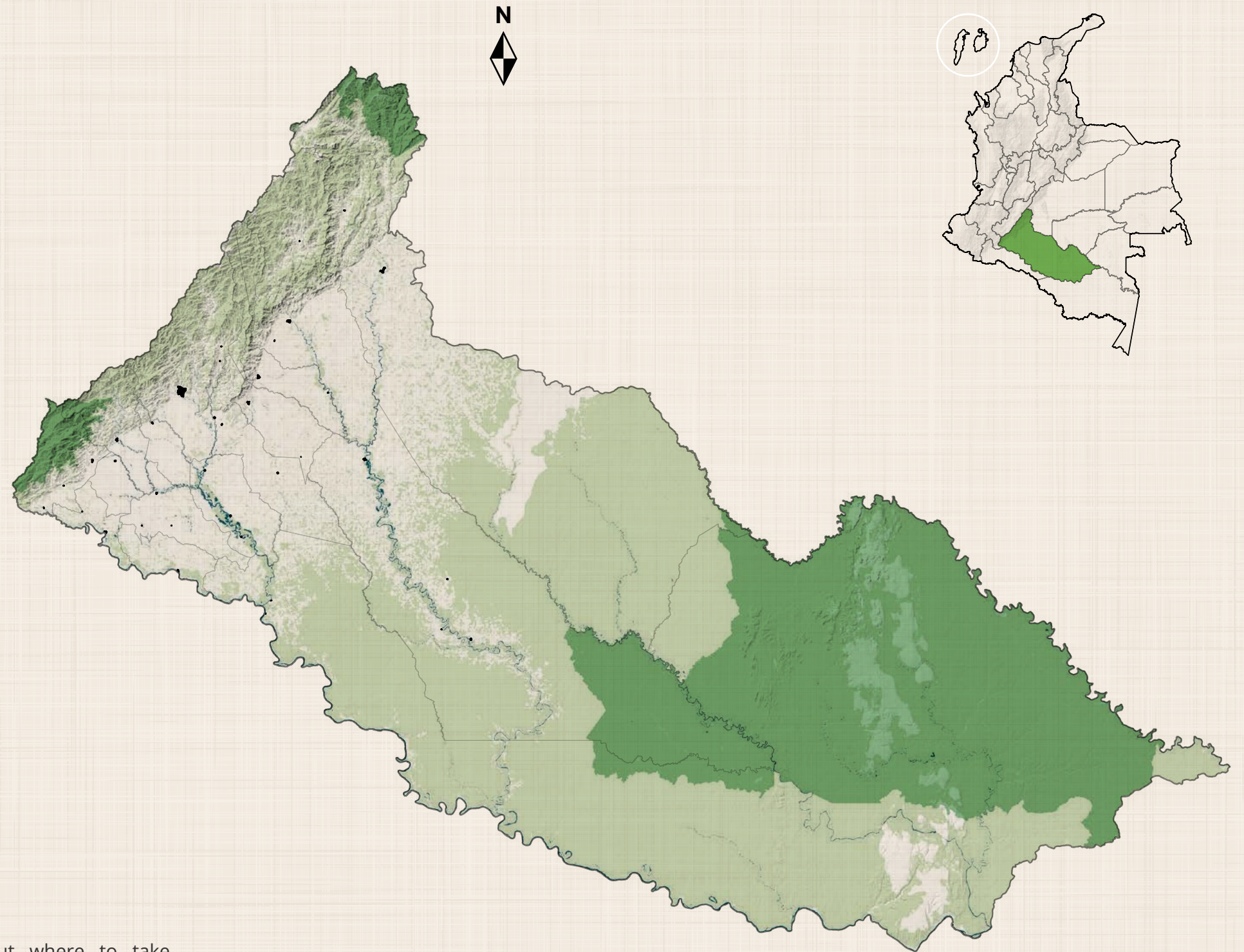
In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors 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.

Caquetá



In this episode of the podcast, I've come to the department of Caquetá. I flew into Florencia, the departmental capital, and I will be going off into the more rural part of the department with my guide, Xiomara, which I'm really looking forward to. Florencia is a really interesting place since the signing of the Colombian peace accord, it's become a place once again that you can visit. And so there's some pioneers like Xiomara working

on tourism, working out where to take people and what to do in this amazing and unexplored department. I'm really looking forward to spending a day here, somewhere I've never been before.

So, we've just been driving for 20 minutes or so, Xiomara, Mario and myself. We've come down, kind of south west from Florencia. We're going... we're actually on the road that ends up, eventually, going to San Vicente del Caguán, which is on the way to the Macarena, which I was... where I was in a recent episode of the podcast. I'm here with Xiomara, we've just stopped for a moment. It's a nice spot, we're looking back over towards the mountains which form part of Colombia's eastern mountain range, and where we are in Caquetá, we're actually at the beginning of the plains, the huge eastern plains, which run all the way across through Brazil and southern Venezuela to the Atlantic Ocean. So, Xiomara and I were just coming down, there was just a nice road to a place called Montañita, we turned off and we're heading towards our destination today, which is the... Las Dalias natural reserve.

Xiomara: Elegimos Las Dalias porque es un sitio, digamos, una muestra representativa de todo el Caquetá.



Xiomara was just telling me that... I asked her why she'd chosen Las Dalias out of the whole different places we could have gone for a day in Caquetá. And she said, really, it's a little bit like... It's a concentration of a lot of what Caquetá has to offer. So Caquetá's got rivers crossing all over it, and the place we're gonna go actually is famous for having quite a long canyon the river runs through. So we're gonna go for a walk through the canyon, and also we'll see some points where crude oil actually emerges from the earth in its natural state, which was basically how we discovered this resource that's now brought us to this tipping point that we currently find ourselves at. So, I'm really looking forward to going with them and walk around the park. The other thing that's important to note is that this is a private initiative, as are so many of these types of reserve in Colombia. It's a family that decided to dedicate a part of their land to conservation. And so I'll be able to meet the families, go and talk to them about why they decided to do this and what their objectives are. So, vámonos. Let's go!



Alfonso: Pues, me he dedicado a la vida turística, ya llevo 20 años.

So we're here at the start of Las Dalías reserve. I'm here with Alfonso, who is one of the architects of the reserve. So, Alfonso was telling me a moment ago that he's been doing a lot of work on conservation, especially with his neighbors as well. So I'll be asking him about that as we take a walk through his reserve. The important thing to know is this is a reserve which is a private initiative of Alfonso and his family.

So, we just stopped for a moment, at this, the start of one of the trails, and Alfonso just wanted to show me the real visual impact, what him, and his family have been able to achieve. We're looking across the valley at the moment. And he said that when he first bought this land 30 years ago, it was all dedicated to cattle farming. So there was no forest whatsoever. It was all grassland on which cattle were grazing, and as you look at it now, I mean, I cannot see a single piece of grassland. We're looking at a dense forest. I know now because Alfonso's told me it's not an original forest, but it doesn't matter. It looks... everything's been repopulated by native plants and trees and species. And it's absolutely incredible visually, when he tells you that what you're looking at now, which looks like a virgin rainforest, just a few short years ago, a couple of decades ago was grassland dedicated to cattle farming.

Alfonso: Una de las formas de recuperar verdaderamente es dejando que la naturaleza haga su trabajo.

So I asked Alfonso to tell me whether the reforestation of this area had been planned, or whether it was just sort of organic forest growth. And he said, "basically, we didn't really have to plan anything because these Amazon lands," as they call them around here, this is part of the wider Amazon basin. So he said, "these Amazon lands are incredibly fertile," so all he did was he stopped grazing cattle in the land. That was it. And so, the first that we're walking through now is about as original as it could possibly be.

Alfonso: Ahorita vamos a ver un modelo de cómo se está aprovechando el bosque en la implementación de maderables.

This is a really interesting story of Alfonso. So the forest we're walking through is now about 15 to 20 years old, depending on which area of the forest you're in. And recently, as we were walking through he started to point out some specific species that have in fact been introduced. And these are trees which have been grown for their wood. And these have actually been carefully sited within the forest, as future income opportunity. When I asked Alfonso "why don't you just leave this as a natural reserve?", and he said, "well, you know, at the end of the day, this used to be a cattle grazing land and there was income that was being generated from grazing the cattle." "So if we can do something which combines the conservation and the reforestation of an area with a new way of earning money, that's even better. Because, you know, we do need to make a living."



So, up until now his reserve has been focused 100% on tourism, and one of the things that he wants to show people... the opportunity he wants to give people, is to show them how you can actually build a business that provides you with an income from conservation. But he also now wants to take it to the next stage and say that you can give something back to nature, but nature can also provide income for you within that context and it can be sustainable income within a context of conservation.

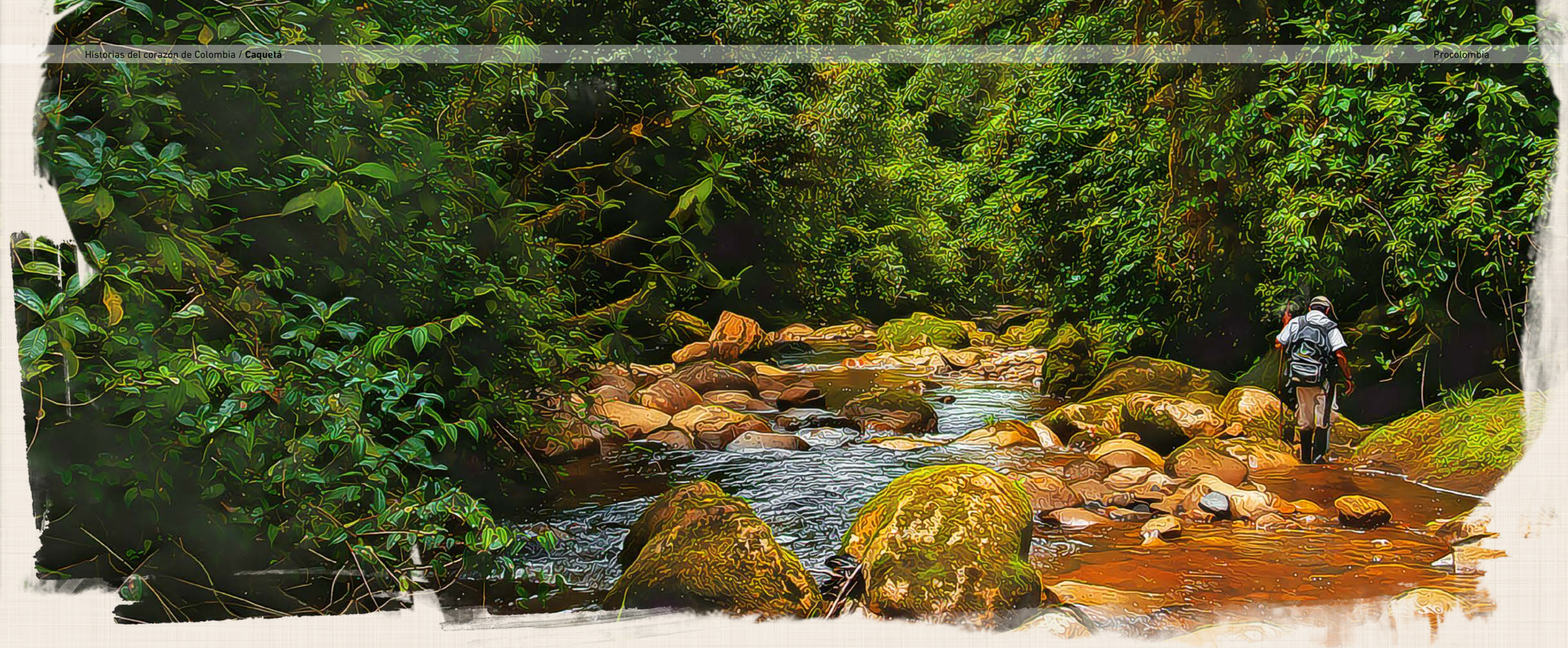
And so I ask Alfonso to tell me a little bit more about the geographical significance of where we are. And he tells me that we're in the... effectively the foothills of the Andes mountains. We're in a type of buffer zone between the Andes mountains and the huge Amazon plains. And he said that this is a really important area because it's all about water generation. And most of the water comes up through underground aquifers, and emerges in springs up in the mountains. And he said, "if we don't preserve what we have right now, the water is not going to get to the Amazon." We wouldn't have the great Amazon. We'd just have a great desert. And he said that's part of the social responsibility, effectively, that is his and his countrymen's responsibility. And he said, "one day we will no longer be here, but we will have sown the seed. Our children and others who come to this place will be able to benefit from that. They'll take away an image of a conservation site with them." And he said, "wherever we are, we can contribute to conservation. And we can contribute to repairing some of the damage that we've done."

And Xiomara, it turns out, is quite an avid birdwatcher. Just before we started for the walk she pulled quite a nice-looking set of binoculars out there, a case, and she's been walking along with them hanging around her neck. So I asked her, you know, "are they for

birdwatching, by any chance?" She said, "yeah." And has named a number of really interesting species that are endemic to the area. And she said obviously today, just because of the timing of when we were able to organize this meeting and this recording, it's early afternoon. So it's very... it's unlikely that we'll see too many different species of birds. They were resting at the moment. She said, "if you walk these paths early morning, late afternoon, you'll find a plethora of bird life." Not least of which one of my own personal favorite birds, the Toucan, and a number of its different representations.

Wow, this is a fantastic part of the path. Alfonso has just brought me down to what they call 'the canyon'. And it's basically... it's a little gorge, really, only about five to eight meters deep, depending on which part you're in, and there's a creek, running down the middle of it. I didn't bring any spare shoes with me. So I'm walking it barefoot, which is actually fantastic. Because the bed of the creek is basically very fine sand and small rocks. There's a couple of bits where the rocks get a little bit sharper, but nothing unmanageable. And it's just great to walk down the riverbed, barefoot, feeling the ground underneath me. And as we were walking down, there were these points at which crude oil is literally just seeping out of the rocks. I'm gonna stop recording for a second as I make my way across a fallen tree trunk, which takes me between two, quite deep looking parts of the creek. This is lovely, the collage opens up ahead of me and sunlight begins to filter in. You've just got this absolutely beautiful play of light. And I don't really care that this is... this is reforested. I mean it looks... It feels original. These are plants that you see in any part of the Colombian Amazon. So we've got trees towering above us, there are vines coming down from the trees, all around us. There's a deep, deep green of the leaves, there's moss and ferns growing all up the walls of the gorge. And on the other side, where it opens out, the sun is shining through...





mid afternoon sun shining through the leaves and plants. Butterflies fluttering around me. And as you can probably hear in the background, the creek just flowing past. I'm going to stop recording now and just enjoy this absolutely beautiful, beautiful, natural environment. And also having the privilege of being one of few who have come here so far, and I hope one of many who will come here eventually. It's really something very special.

👤 **Xiomara:** A nivel de Caquetá, tenemos tres rutas. La ruta centro, que es Florencia...

I asked Xiomara about tourism opportunities in wider Caquetá, and places that she's developing as destinations. And she tells me that up until now, in Caquetá, she's developed three routes, basically. There's the central route, that includes Florencia, and its local environment. There's the southern route, which goes down to a municipality called Morelia and Belén de los Andaquíes. And reaches San José de Fragata, Curillo. And there's a northern route, which goes from Florencia towards Montañita, Paujil, Doncello and eventually reaches San Vicente. And there

are different tourism opportunities on each of the routes. And she says on the central route, you'll find a lot more indigenous communities. For example, Huitotos. And you can try their typical food. And the southern route, she says, is really all about conservation, spending time in nature, visiting beautiful waterfalls, taking trips down amazing rivers. And adventure tourism, so there's rafting, kayaking, and other types of adventure tourism. And also, down south, she said are the bird watching opportunities. And towards the north, it's also about adventure tourism and trekking.

As Alfonso said at the very end, when I asked him if he had any last words, he basically said, "look. All I can say is I invite you to visit Caquetá. Come and visit this hidden gem of tourism in Colombia. For a number of historical reasons, I couldn't invite you to come visit me until very recently, but now that I can, he said, "come, come before anyone else does, and come and visit this hidden gem in southeastern Colombia." And I completely agree with him. It's an absolutely beautiful place. As soon as I can, I'm going to find the time to come back and come back on my bike, with my tent, and come and camp on Alfonso's campsite.



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