

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Casanare

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.

Casanare



—Hola, ¿Laura?, mucho gusto.

Laura: ¡Sí, mucho gusto! ¿Cómo te va? Bienvenido. ¿Cómo has estado, bien?

—Bien, muchas gracias.

Laura: ¡Ah bueno!

So, I just met my host today, Laura Miranda. We're in Casanare, I flew into Yopal this morning and Casanare is in northeastern Colombia; it borders Arauca, where I was in a previous episode of the podcast. Laura runs a tour agency here, I'll let her introduce herself in a moment, and she's going to take me off... We're gonna do what she calls a 'safari llanero', which is like a low plains safari.

Laura: Hola, muchas gracias, mi nombre es Laura Miranda. Yo soy ecóloga, soy oriunda de Yopal, Casanare y vivo actualmente en...

I asked Laura to tell us a little bit about herself and what she's doing with tourism in this part of the world. She tells me she's an ecologist and she's originally from Yopal, Casanare, and she lives in Yopal, Casanare. And she runs, as well as a tourism business, an environmental organization which works hand in hand with the tourism business. It's all about nature tourism, and this is where the 'llanero safari' comes from, which takes in some of the natural reserves in Casanare. And she tells me that today we're going to visit one of the most beautiful places that she knows of in Casanare. It's a private nature reserve and it became a reserve about 3 years ago; it's a working cattle farm, it continues to be a working cattle farm, but it has also entered into a commitment to protect and conserve nature. And in the reserve there are birdwatching opportunities, there's scientific tourism opportunities, and basically, she said, you immerse yourself in *llanero* culture, in the culture of the Colombian plains, which is very unique to the Department of Casanare, she tells me. In terms of the animal life that we'll be able to see today, she said we're gonna see huge herds of capybara, we'll see crocodiles, deer, and a huge number of birds. We're entering into summertime or the dry season, so the birds will be concentrated around the watering holes; and if we're really lucky, we might even get to see an anteater. And if we're even more lucky -although she did say that usually requires a little bit more time to go further into the reserve-, but we may even be able to see a puma.

Laura: Esa reserva tiene una extensión total de 9,000 hectáreas...





The reserve is about nine thousand hectares, so it's a fairly large reserve. But it's not completely... It's not as if, you know, from one day to the next the owners moved from having a commercial cattle farm into a nature reserve where they aren't able to earn money to pay for the upkeep of the reserve. So it's really, it's a sort of an intermediate figure in land use legislation, whereby the owners obtain, or the owners apply for, and are granted a figure of nature reserve but they are allowed to continue their traditional activities. So this was a cattle farm; they are allowed to continue farming cattle, they're allowed to continue making money, but they conduct at the same time activities around conservation and dedicate part of the land to... Specifically to conservation, and other parts of the land to mixed use. And Laura was just telling me that what you'll find is quite interesting because the cattle farming on this particular ranch is not something which isn't either/or situation, is not that a field is dedicated to the cattle and another field is left for the conservation. She said the whole farm is basically working towards a conservation model. So, the native animals, the endemic animals here coexist alongside the cows. She said "you'll see in a moment when we get to the main part of the ranch, that you'll see capybaras next to the cows, for example, just wandering around in the same field." So, it's quite an interesting hybrid model that encourages land owners of all sizes, but especially large landowners, to dedicate a certain area of their land to conservation, while allowing them to continue to farm, which has always been one of the sort of barriers, perhaps, to conservation in the past. Definitely in Colombia where it was an either/or situation. You either completely gave all of your land to conservation, or... Or not.

Laura: Un encanto. Un encanto salvaje. Algo lindo de admirar, es amor...

In her own words... 'El Hato', she said, "it's enchanting. It's a place where you can be at peace with yourself and at peace with nature, and just come and observe the animals that we've got here in their natural habitat." And as she was saying, that was fantastic, suddenly we're just walking through a little wood. And as she was saying it, this enormous iguana suddenly stood up... it was right in front of us; we hadn't even noticed, it was sort of camouflaged in the ground. And it stood up and just... And ran away. And as it did we came out of the woods, and we're now looking over to a whole family of capybaras which are munching on the grass and wandering over to the water, and I... I'm gonna ask Eliana about their life cycle; I believe they spend most of the time in the water and just come out to eat.

So, I asked Eliana to tell us a little bit about the capybara population here, and especially why they decided to allow them to roam free. Capybaras were hunted to very low numbers, they became endangered in Colombia a few years ago. And so what the reserve did was... they said, they'd let them roam free. And they also understood that capybaras are an essential part of the local food chain. So they're a food source for the predatory animals -there are pumas here on the ranch-, and if we take away that food source then we're taking something fundamental away that's become part of the food chain of many, many generations; thousands of years, perhaps. And they wanted to ensure that the sustainability wasn't just about sustaining the capybara populations, but also about the populations that depend on them. And they are very prolific breeders, she said, each cow has around... Has four litters a year, and each litter has four calves. So that's quite a hefty rate of expansion, but because of the natural predators around about one in four of the cubs -calves- that are born survive through adulthood, so the population is maintained naturally, at a locally sustainable level.



So now I find myself with 'Seco'. I said "what do you wanna be called?", and he said "Seco," that's his nickname. Eliana's dad. And I'll let him introduce himself, so you know who he is and what he does.

Seco: Yo soy Seco, como usted bien lo decía. Me dedico, hoy en día...

And Seco says, "yeah, indeed, my name is 'Seco', just like you just said. And, basically what I do now is I take people on tours around this part of the world, around this beautiful Department of Casanare." So I asked Seco what a typical day, if he was gonna put together the ideal day to show people what he knows and loves about his land. And he said "well, the ideal day, it would have to be on horseback, so we'd start off, I'd teach you how to put the saddle on your horse and then we'd go on for a horse ride, and we'd just go off looking at... Basically, looking at these amazing landscapes and seeing what animals cross our paths on the way." So I asked him, obviously, what animals and he said "well, the first thing are obviously all of these capybaras," I mean, they're all over the place as we're walking now and they took completely oblivious to us, we've just been walking through a herd of capybaras. He said we would probably see deer, there are lots of deer on the ranch. And in fact as we were driving in this morning there were a couple of deer just playing around in the field next to us. He mentioned the puma as well, he said if



we're lucky, we would find a puma and he said the bird life is just incredible, this amazing multitude of birds. And then finish the day at a point, somewhere you can watch the sunset.

Seco: Tomarse un buen desayuno y que en ese desayuno, a ver, llegue un buen caldo de costilla...

So, I asked Seco what we would have to eat after all this time out in the *llano*, and he said "well, first of all, you gotta just think about breakfast," so he said "for breakfast we'd either have a beef broth or we'd have a *tungo*," which is a local... A bit like a steamed dumpling kind of dish. It's ground rice flour which is then mixed with fermented milk and cheese and it's steamed, and so that's also part of a typical breakfast with a mug of hot chocolate. And we'd then go off on horseback or walking through the *Llanos* and then obviously for lunch we would have the famous *mamona*, which is the very, very slow cooked beef, which is quite young beef; and as he was describing it to me it made my mouth water. And it's around about lunch time now, so I think it's probably time for us to go off and see if there's something to eat.

We just took an amazing drive across the whole ranch on the back of the safari Jeep that Cunaguaro have put together. It's a really, really nice, well put together, it's a 4x4 pick up truck and in the back they've got seating



for 6 people. Nice, really well padded seats with a sunshade on the top. We just drive across the plains, you really get a feeling of the endlessness of these plains. I mean, it's almost flat as far as the eye can see. You can just see the occasional very low, tree-covered hill, way in the distance and it's absolutely incredible driving across the plains. I mean, the fauna is just amazing. The capybaras are all over the place, I mean, they're just endemic. Cows, obviously. And there are loads of deer as well. And because the reserve's been

operating for a fair amount of time now, they are not particularly bothered by the fact that there's a vehicle driving past. There are deer all over the place, we just drove past a wood full of deer. And apparently at sunset it's even more striking. And the sun's, sort of, the last rays of sun penetrating the trees and the deer congregate in the woods. It's absolutely beautiful. What else did we see... Some small crocodiles, all sorts of birdlife... I mean, all sorts; I won't even begin to try to name all of the birds we saw. And just driving across the

ranch, without even really looking. I mean, 20? 30? 40 different species of birds? I don't know, just everywhere, every single time I turned around there was a different bird. I'm not a birder myself, but Laura and Eliana, my guides -if you're into birdwatching-, they can definitely help orient you with regards to what species of birds there are here. It's absolutely gorgeous. The deep green grass of the plains, the trees bordering your views, sort of framing your views; rivers, water everywhere. The

Jeep's constantly driving through mud baths and rivers and across shallow lakes. And it's extremely peaceful, because as soon as you stop the vehicle and turn the engine off there are no other vehicles for 20 or 30 km around. So you don't hear anything except the sounds of nature. Really it's a very, very special place. I'll definitely, definitely be back to spend a bit more time here exploring and really learning properly about all of the local fauna and how it all interacts.



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