

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Risaralda

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.

Risaralda



So I'm just about to arrive at the Termales de Santa Rosa de Cabal, the thermal springs in a town called Santa Rosa de Cabal, which is in the Department of Risaralda. Risaralda is in the coffee growing region of Colombia. It's one of Colombia's smallest departments, and I know very little about it. It's not somewhere I've traveled very much before. I've only been here once and I'm really looking forward to meeting Freddy, my guide today, who's going to tell me a bit more about the history of the department and especially, as is the nature of this podcast, his own personal history. And he's going to guide me. We're going to go in a walk up from the commercial center of the

thermal springs where people go and bathe and there's a spa, then all sorts of other things. We're actually going to walk up through the forest to the source of the thermal springs, and he's going to explain a little bit to me about the local ecology, the particular nature of these thermal springs and talk about his life and the progress he's been able to make thanks to tourism.

—¿Freddy?

Freddy: Hola.

—Hola, ¿cómo estás?

Freddy: Hola, mucho gusto. ¿Cómo ha estado?

—Bien, muchas gracias.

Freddy: ¿Cómo le fue?

—Bien, súper.

Freddy: Ah, ok. ¿Todo bien? ¿El recorrido estuvo bien?

Juan Carlos: Podemos ofrecer mucho servicio, mucho beneficio, mucho bienestar. Tenemos para ofrecerles cuatro piscinas de...

So Juan Carlos was telling me a little bit about this particular thermal spring, he gets visitors from, mostly from Colombia, but from all over the world as well. Usually people come on a day trip, but if you do want to spend more than a day here, there's lodging and there are lots of hotels as well in the local area. There's a spa so you can get therapeutic massages and other spa treatments. And there are also all sorts of nature walks like the one I'm going to do with Freddy a little bit later on. So we're just crossing over the Quebrada Santa Helena, the St. Helena Creek, which is mixed. The St. Helena Creek comes right down from the high páramo ecosystem, and we're going to walk towards there with Freddy in the moment. So the water here is... it's a mix of the St. Helena Creek and the thermal waters that are flowing through the bathing areas and then out into the river,





Freddy: Nick, te tienes que tomar la foto aquí en la cascada. Mira...

Wow. So yeah, this is gorgeous. Just as we were walking up, just came around the corner and Freddy said, “yeah, look up to your left, you’ve got to take a photo here”, there’s a gorgeous waterfall, at the St Helena Creek. Actually more of a river than a creek, the St. Helena Creek flowing down probably 50, 60 meter high falls. And a very interesting statistic, apparently. I love the Colombians, love their statistics. And so Freddy said this is the fifth most photographed waterfall in Colombia, which is a great statistic to have, and I’m going to take a photo here and be one of those people. Try and make it the fourth most photographed waterfall in Colombia.

So I’ve just come through a private gate, which Freddy kindly opened for me. I’m here with Freddy Echeverry, and he’s my guide. He’s going to take me up to the natural hot spring where the waters come down to this more commercial area from... should be about an hour or so walking up there through this absolutely pristine Andean forest. And he said the water is going to be a lot hotter up there. They’ve also made a sort of... a form of a Turkish bath where we can go in there, clean our lungs out with some of the steam coming up off the much hotter waters closer up to the spring.

Freddy: Yo soy santarrosano, yo tengo 27 años, mis padres son de aquí de Santa Rosa de Cabal...

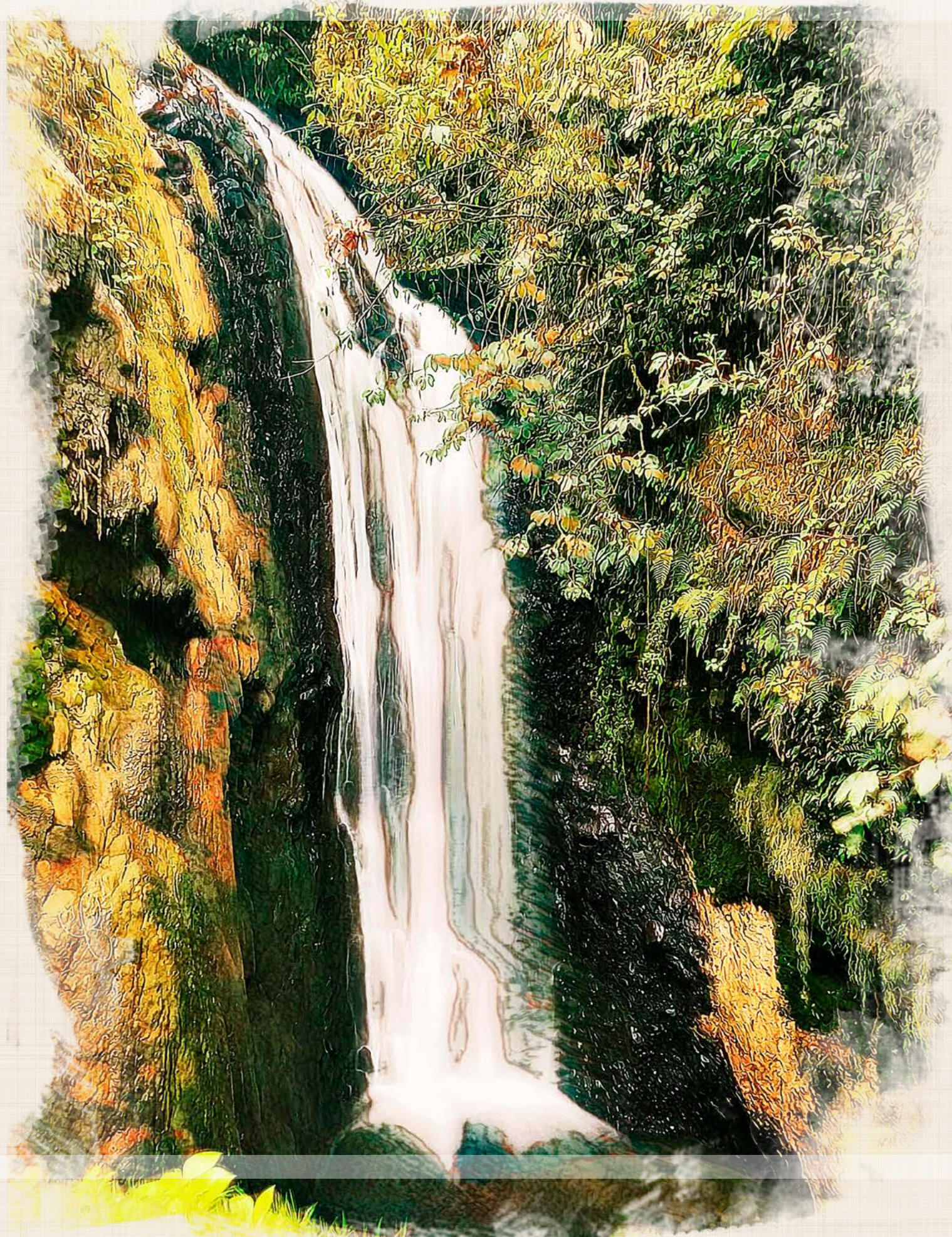
So Freddy was just telling me a little bit about his life and the way that he became involved with these thermal springs. He studied environmental engineering, but he's been in contact with the thermal springs, basically all of his life. And he was telling me that before he graduated, he got a job here as an environmental coordinator, and he's been working here ever since. He's 27 now, so he's been working full time for five years now and more than just the hot springs themselves as a sort of spa destination, he's really interested in sharing the region's natural riches and historical riches, so we'll be walking now what is actually one of the ancient royal roads, they call them. These are really ancient indigenous pathways where the original inhabitants of these lands would have, first of all, discovered the lands and then they used these pathways. They were communication routes between towns. So these are basically ancient pathways that have been used for thousands of years by people to travel for trade. And so we're walking up one of those into the forest, which is actually in the process of being recovered. These are all private lands and it's a private initiative. An agreement between landowners and the forest is being replanted with this native species. So I'll check with Freddy when it happened, what came before the replanting. And he said they do a lot of projects with school kids, where schoolchildren will come, learn a little bit about nature, learn at a bit of a deeper level about the thermal springs, which are such an emblematic part of this town. And they will plant some trees.



Freddy: Bueno, Nick, mira. Esta zona, ecosistémicamente, era algo muy pobre...

So I asked Freddy... He said that this is a forest which is in recovery. So I asked him what it's being recovered from. And he said that if you came here 50 years ago, you would have found pretty much no trees. Most of the trees had either been logged, cut down for their wood or there was a lot of charcoal production, so the trees would be cut down. Wood was used to make charcoal, and the land that was left behind was used for cattle ranching. So about 80 years ago, a family bought this land, a forward-thinking family because from around 50 years ago, they decided that they wanted to return the land to its natural state. So Freddy's one of the people who is involved with coordinating these efforts, and he was saying there's... basically everybody who comes to work at the thermal springs also receives training and is involved in the protection and the recovery of the forest, which is now covered by a number of environmental norms and laws.

This water is seriously hot. We've just come to some concentration tanks. They use them to allow sediment, which naturally comes out of the hot spring to settle in the tanks before the water is piped down into the commercial bathing pools. And he said, I can put my hand in, but to be careful, and he's not kidding. This must be, "qué, cincuenta y algo grados?". Fifty five degrees centigrade, this water. So it's still five minutes away, five minute uphill walk away from the spring and the water here is fifty five degrees. So as we get up to the spring, he said, the water is going to be somewhere between fifty seven and sixty two degrees centigrade. It varies according to a number of environmental factors, not least of which is the amount of... the amount it rained. So the more it rains, the more groundwater filters into the water coming out of the hot spring and it cools it down.



Freddy: Nuestras aguas son aguas telúricas. Hay que comprender que...

So Freddy was just explaining different types of heating mechanisms for thermal springs. This particular one. I was quite curious, actually, because I'm used to thermal springs smelling quite sulfurous. And he just explained, why not? Because he said the sulfurous smell is from when the water's heated by coming into contact with underground lava flows. Whereas these particular waters are telluric. So Freddy just cleared up for me that the telluric flows, they're basically water which has been heated by being in contact with rocks that are moving against each other, and that creates an enormous amount of heat and heats the water. But the water is never in contact with lava, it's just in contact with rock, and therefore it never acquires the mineral properties, which give other thermal waters the sulfur smell. But he did say the really interesting... one of the really interesting things about Santa Rosa is that you can find both types of thermal springs. So just a few kilometers away, as I was driving up to where I am now, there was a sign placed for another thermal spring. And he said that one is magma heated, and therefore it's one of the few places where you can, in one day you can come and bathe in telluric thermal springs and in lava thermal springs. You can get your mineral hit in the other ones and you can come here and this is more about relaxation.



Freddy: Lo que a mí desde la parte ambiental me parece el tema del turismo es la cultura.

I asked Freddy what tourism means to him, what benefits it brought to his life and what difference it's made in his life. And it was really interesting because his first response was, "for me, it's a cultural phenomenon, it's a cultural exchange". And he said that he enjoys as a guide sharing his knowledge with tourists. But from every single trip he takes up and down this mountain, he learns something from them as well, and it enriches his life as he thinks back on the conversations that he's had with people who've come here. And the other thing that he particularly enjoys about working on this site is it's not just tourism, about coming and bathing in a thermal spring. There's a really strong ecological, sustainable, low impact focus being built into everything that they do here. And that's also something which brings great value to Freddy's life.



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