

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Magdalena

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.

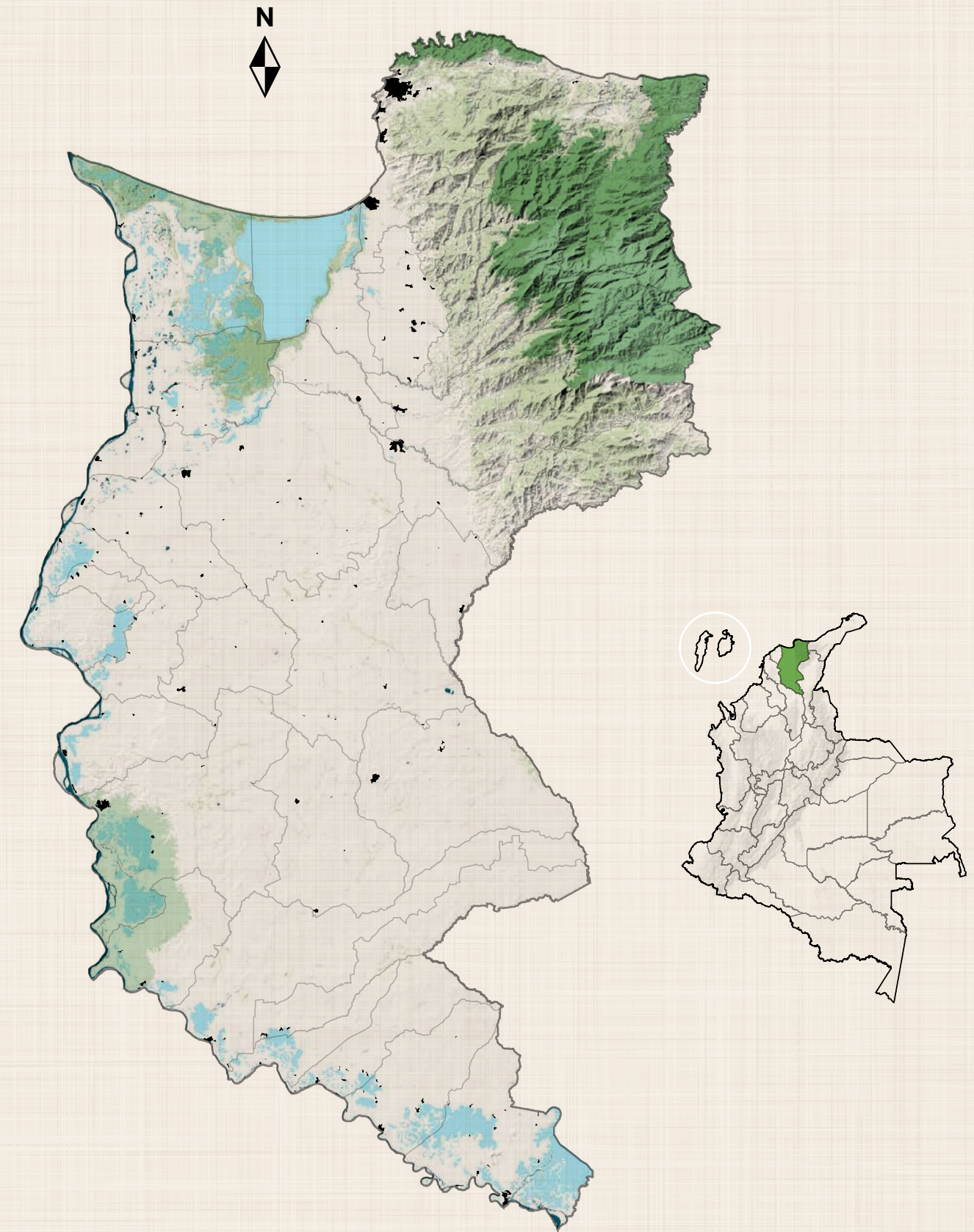
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Magdalena

I'm Nick Perkins, and in this episode of the podcast, I'm in the department of Magdalena on Colombia's northern coast. I drove here from Riohacha, in La Guajira, on a stunning coastal road. And I spent the night in a wooden cabin, perched high above the beach, close to the Tayrona National Park with the sounds of the waves crashing on the beach, way below me. I'll be visiting the park later with my guide, Sergio. He's a keen surfer and cyclist, and talking about some of the multitude of tourist activities that one

can enjoy in this diverse department, with its many indigenous peoples, and settlements, its pristine beaches. And its snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountain range that reaches an elevation of 5,700 meters above sea level, just 40 odd km from the coast.



And after a hearty breakfast in a restaurant overlooking the beach, I head off to meet Sergio at the entrance to the park. It's a lovely sunny morning and I'm really looking forward to going back to the park. The last time I was here was more than 20 years ago.

—Sergio, muchas gracias por estar con nosotros, ¿qué haces por aquí?

Sergio: Uff, un poco de todo, ¿no? Surfeo, monto en bicicleta, hago caminatas...

So I meet Sergio at the entrance to the park, and reminisce a little bit about how much things have changed. Last time I was here, I think was sometime around 1995 and, I mean, as you can imagine everything's changed. I literally don't recognize this. This is somewhere that I visited before, and I know that I have. And I start by asking Sergio to tell me a bit about what he loves about this area. Sergio's not from here, originally. He's from Bogotá. And he moved here a few years ago and I asked him, why? And what it is about this area that attracts him. And he said, he just... he loves the fact that you're surrounded by nature. Wherever you go. He does all sorts of things here. He runs tours. He surfs, he rides his bike, he walks. And he says he loves sharing this with others and taking others along with him on these activities. And he came here a few years ago, actually, in search of surf. He'd been living in Australia for a while and he'd heard that surf up here was good. He came to check it out. It certainly was. He loved it, and he found this beautiful, sacred, magical place and he decided to start a business here. So he bought a piece of land, he built a lodge, and



the idea is to give people a space where they can disconnect from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives and reconnect with nature, with the elements, with things that he says people often forget when they're living in the big city. And I mentioned to him that surfing is not usually an activity one associates with the Tayrona National Park. You think about the pristine beaches, obviously, the indigenous communities, the different activities, hiking, and birdwatching, etc, But you wouldn't usually think about surf. And Sergio says... he actually said something quite funny, because I asked him "have people always surfed here?" And he said, "well the waves have always been here, but maybe the people haven't been coming to surf." He explains to me that the shape of the coast, the rocks under the water, the multiple rivers that flow into the sea, all up and down the coast, provide a perfect environment for surf. And also some different types of waves, all sorts of different types of surfing experience. Unfortunately though, he says, you can't actually surf inside the Tayrona National Park. This is because, sadly, people who have been a little bit careless over the years have suffered some quite challenging experiences with undertows and the very strong currents that there are in the sea. So the national park authority actually banned surfing in the park, but there's multitude of beaches on either side of the park that you can go to surf. And Sergio tells me that the conditions are right here for there to be surf all day long, all year round.

Sergio: Por eso se prohibió el surf en el sector del Tayrona, dentro del parque, porque allá las corrientes son más fuertes.



So, what Sergio was just telling me is, you've gotta watch out around here. The sea is really strong, and we just crossed a point at the beach where there is a river flowing out into the ocean. And just as we cross the mouth of the river, you can really feel the pull of the undertow. One of the stronger undertows I've felt in my life in many different oceans. So I asked him if these are features which are suitable for swimming or if it's really just about the surf, and he said "no, I mean, you've gotta take care, when you're in the park and there's some beaches where surfing and swimming as well are prohibited, and that's for a very good reason." And it's because the undertow and other currents are strong enough to cause challenges for people less experienced with the sea. But he did make the point, I mean, there are times in the year when this looks like a lake rather than a sea, and also, you've just gotta ask around, and make sure you're on the right beach. But he said, yeah, once... when you're in the park, you'll find all sorts... you'll find beaches with enormous waves that really are only suitable for surfers, or really strong and experienced ocean swimmers. And he said you'll also find beaches that are perfect for families with really gentle waves and fewer currents. So just make sure you ask around according to what you're looking for.

So, as well as being a surfer, Sergio is an avid mountain biker. I also like this myself, so it's always interesting to talk to another cyclist about where it's good to ride. He's gonna give us some recommendations in a moment on... basically low impact tourism, in effect. A lot of the areas around this part of the world, around the Parque Tayrona, and not just within the park, but also the surrounding area, sacred indigenous lands. And very often you are allowed to be there, you're allowed to move through them, but it is expected that you request permission from the local community. And so I asked Sergio,



you know, how can you avoid unnecessarily offending sensibilities or entering into one of these sacred lands, inadvertently, of course. And he said, which I think is probably obvious to most of us, you've just gotta ask. He said it's better to ask too many questions than not enough questions. So, you know, when you get somewhere that you're not sure about just ask somebody, if you're sitting somewhere having a juice, taking a break on your ride. Just make sure you ask, you know, "is it okay to go down here? Is it okay to ride down there?" The answer will almost never be no, but it might well be "yes, but you've gotta go and ask the local community leader."

i Sergio: Senderismo, avistamiento de aves, obviamente pues relajarte en la playa, disfrutar del mar, si te gusta caretiar, es un...

So, other things you can do in the park. Obviously, I'm kind of focusing on cycling, and Sergio's obviously focusing on surfing, but there's all sorts of activities in the park. If you're just into lying on the beach, you can lie on the beach. There's places to stay in the park, there are restaurants... There's a lot of infrastructure that's been built up over recent years. So, yeah, you can go walking the trails. There are multiple trails in the park, bird watching opportunities. A lot of people go to the park specifically to do bird watching, and, of course, snorkeling. It's an incredibly popular destination for snorkeling. So, bring your snorkel, the snorkeling's great. Or, something interesting he said, you can just sit on the beach and meditate. So, yeah, there's something for everyone in Parque Tayrona.



I spent a lovely morning with Sergio wandering along the paths and beaches at the Tayrona National Park. Forging rivers and scrambling over rocky outcrops. The endless beaches are just gorgeous. But when you start to walk inland, you are quickly surrounded by dense jungle vegetation and there's a huge diversity of flora and fauna. And I think one of the most striking things about this area, is that if you look up from the beach just over the jungle behind you, you can see the towering peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. It seems so improbable that there'd be such a massive snow-capped mountain range, just a stone's throw from a Caribbean beach. Well you can trek up thousands of meters above sea level, passing through indigenous communities and visiting the ruins of ancient civilizations. Magdalena really does seem to have something for everyone.





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