

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Bolívar

Stories from the Heart of Colombia A podcast by Procolombia

Editorial committee

María José Silva
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Editorial direction

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Graphic design

Mateo L. Zúñiga
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Illustration

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Diana Londoño Aguilera

Edition

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Alexander Klein Ochoa
Juan Micán González
Leonardo Realpe Bolaños
Nicolás Sepúlveda Perdomo

Original Locution

Nick Perkins

Original photos

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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.

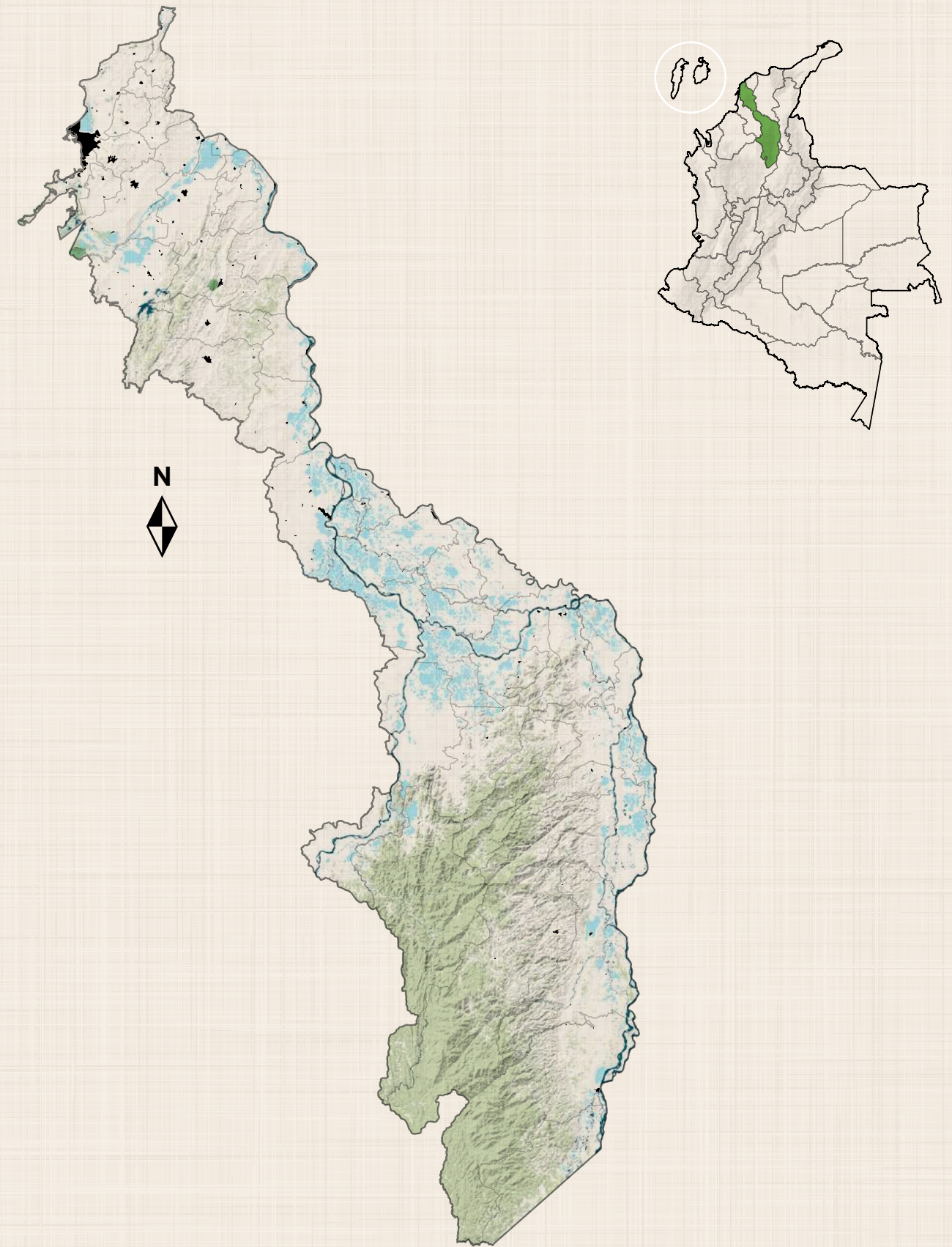
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Bolívar

So, I found myself leaning over the beautiful wooden balustrade on the balcony of my hotel in the old city of Cartagena in the Department of Bolívar, which is the subject of today's episode. Cartagena has a long and interesting history, which we'll be hearing about from my guide Marta, who'll be joining me in a few minutes. We'll go for a walk around the city, she's gonna show me some of the sites and hopefully we'll take a walk along the city wall which was built many centuries ago to protect the city from attack from the sea. Cartagena's a very, very picturesque city, just to wander around. You can get lost for hours

in its narrow streets. Just wandering past the beautiful colonial Republican buildings on either side, protected from the Caribbean sun by the shade cast by the wooden balconies that most of the buildings have. Cartagena really does have something for everyone, and I'm going to be asking Marta to talk to us as we walk around the city about all of the different things on offer.



It's a beautiful sunny day, there's not a cloud in the sky. It's just after 9 in the morning, the temperature's already in the high twenties. And by the time Marta and I finish our walk, sometime around midday, it's gonna be up into the low thirties. Beautiful place to come and visit. Something for everyone here, I think.

Marta: Bueno, ¡bienvenido, Nick! Vamos a empezar el recorrido por un trayecto de Baluarte, vamos a proseguir...

So, I'm off with Marta, we're gonna have a look around the city, she's gonna take me to some of its parks and plazas, and then we're going to take a walk around the city wall. She's going to take me to a part which is known as "Las Bóvedas," which has one of the best views across the ocean, on one side, and the city on the other. So, yeah, it's gonna be great, let's go!

—Tú eres cartagenera, ¿cierto?

Marta: Correcto.

So I asked Marta, as a local resident — she's from Cartagena, she's lived here most of her life — aside from tourism, what the old town of Cartagena really means to her as a person, and she said "it's my history, it's my heritage. I walk these streets and they're just like they've been for hundreds of years; the buildings, the architecture, the colors, the sounds, the music, the people." She can really feel her history and her heritage as she walks these streets.



So I asked Marta to talk a little bit about what tourists expect when they come to Cartagena, and she said it's kind of split between some people come here as a sort of sun, sea and sand destination. There are beautiful beaches, there are miles and miles of coastline; and others come for the architecture and the old colonial part of the city. And she said "we also can't forget that Bolívar is more than just Cartagena." So, within the wider Department, in the coastal areas, you got lots of tiny little coral islands that you can go and visit as part of nature tourism trips. Some of them you can actually stay in; others are day trips from Cartagena or you can do a longer trip to visit different small islands and explore the wildlife on the islands, the marine life on the islands. So there's all sorts of things going on in and around Cartagena.

Marta: Cartagena está llena... Es bonita y es interesante porque muchos de los personajes que han plasmado sus experiencias e historias...

So I asked Marta if I'm right in thinking that, it doesn't matter what street we're on in Cartagena, she's going to be able to tell me some kind of myth or legend associated with that street. And she laughed and she said "well, kind of, yeah!" And then she said "actually, it's not just the myths and legends, it's also the people that have been part of Cartagena's history." And so, she tells me a



story about Gabriel García Márquez, arguably Colombia's most famous and successful author. Apparently — it was in the mid-1940s — there was an event in Bogotá called “el Bogotazo.” At that time Gabriel García Márquez was an unknown author, he had yet to publish his magnum opus and he was broke. So he went to see his editor and he said “you know what can I do? I've got no money, but I need to get out of the city,” and his editor says to him “look, I've got a friend in Cartagena. I'm sure if you can get yourself up to Cartagena, he'll get you some work, he'll find you work.” So off goes García Márquez to Cartagena. He was told he could meet his editor's friend in a restaurant on the Plaza de Bolívar, the central square in Cartagena. So, off goes García Márquez, he gets up to Cartagena, he goes to the restaurant in the Plaza de Bolívar, and it turns out that the editor's friend no longer works in the restaurant. So he's there, he's got not a penny to his name, saying “what, what am I gonna do?” And it turns out that Colombia's most famous, successful, eminent author, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, spent his first night at Cartagena sleeping on a park bench in the Plaza de Bolívar.



Having spent a few hours with Marta, wandering the streets of Cartagena, I thought it would be interesting to come a little bit further inland in the Department of Bolívar, and visit the very picturesque town of Mompox on the banks of the river Magdalena.

Alfredo: Alfredo, mucho gusto, Nicolás.

—Nick, me dicen. Mucho gusto.

And I'm sitting on the banks of the river right now in a rocking chair next to my guest Luis Alfredo Domínguez. He's a local resident and tour guide, and he runs a popular blog about Mompox and the surrounding area.

Alfredo: Originalmente, el nombre de la ciudad es 'Mompój', con jota.

So, Luis Alfredo is telling me that... I asked him about the name of the town, because you sometimes see it written with an 'x' at the end and sometimes with an 's' at the end, and I asked him about these two different spellings. And also about the pronunciation, because I think it's my English language roots that tend to make me say 'Mompox' when I read the 'x' at the end. But then I heard him, he said 'Mompós'. So, I asked him for the correct pronunciation. He said "actually, there are three ways of spelling the name of the town. When the Spanish first came here, it was called 'Mompój', it was an indigenous settlement, it was the Malibúe indigenous peoples who were the original inhabitants of this land. And the Spanish, in their style of the time, changed the 'x' sound at the end – which would usually be a 'j' in Spanish – to an 'x', and hence the fact that it has an 'x' at the end, so it's 'Mompój'. But then, after independence, the local inhabitants wanted nothing more to do with the Spanish and they changed the 'x' to an 's', but whichever way you spell it you



say 'Mompós'. Luis Alfredo, as well, told me that he's a member of the Cultural Heritage Community here in Mompox, and he spends his life focused on protecting and highlighting and telling people about Mompox's long cultural history.

Alfredo: Bueno, la filigrana es un arte árabe que fue traído por los españoles a Mompox.

Mompox is very well known for its very intricate gold filigree jewelry. And, I asked Luis Alfredo to explain a little bit about the history of how that particular style reached Mompox, or how it developed in Mompox. And he said it was actually brought here by the Spanish, but it's not a Spanish style. It's a Northern African Arab style. Spain, obviously having been colonized by the Moors for a good many centuries had a load of customs, which they introduced into Spain. And when the Spanish colonizers came here they brought that with them. And when they got to Mompox they discovered a local indigenous community that also worked very fine jewelry, and these two traditions fused together and became what is known now as the Mompox filigree jewelry style. And that still continues through to today. There's jewelry shops and jewelers all around the village, and you can find ready-made jewels or, he said, you can also have things made for you and it still continues to be a significant economic activity of Mompox today.



Luis Alfredo has his blog. So, he was studying systems engineering in Barranquilla, and it was at the start of the internet boom, and he just wanted to make a blog; I mean, at the time blogging was popular. So he opened a blog about his city, he said his dad brought him up to be proud of where he was from and to share that pride in where he was from with others, and he said he just started a blog just to sort of put stuff up about his city. And then people started contacting him. He said it was... There's a look of surprise on his face as he says people started contacting him. And he said mostly they started asking how to get to Mompox, because Mompox traditionally was a very, very difficult place to get to, other than by river. And so he put a section called "how to arrive," and then people started to write to him to say "great! Now I know how to arrive, what do I do when I'm there?" So he started adding bits about the local culture and local sites and monuments. And then people started writing to him and say, well, to ask whether he could take them on a tour. So he started taking them on tours. And he said it was just really very organic, one thing led to another. He said that nowadays he still does a little bit of systems engineering work, but his primary income now comes from tourism. And he said this blog that led to him becoming a local expert in tourism has basically changed his life. It's enabled him to give his family a better life, and he said, "I'm much more comfortable now than I've ever been."



And I have to be honest. I'm actually quite sad to have to leave Mompox so soon after I arrived. The challenge of visiting the whole of Colombia in two months means that I've gotta get on the road. This is definitely a place to come and just spend a few days wandering the streets and say, talk to someone like Alfredo, who I spoke to yesterday evening. Take a tour, get an idea of what's what, and where's where, and then just head out on your own. Wind around. Gorgeous, gorgeous old colonial town. Keeps its oldwordly charm in a way that few others do.



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