

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Vichada

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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Illustration

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Edition

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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.

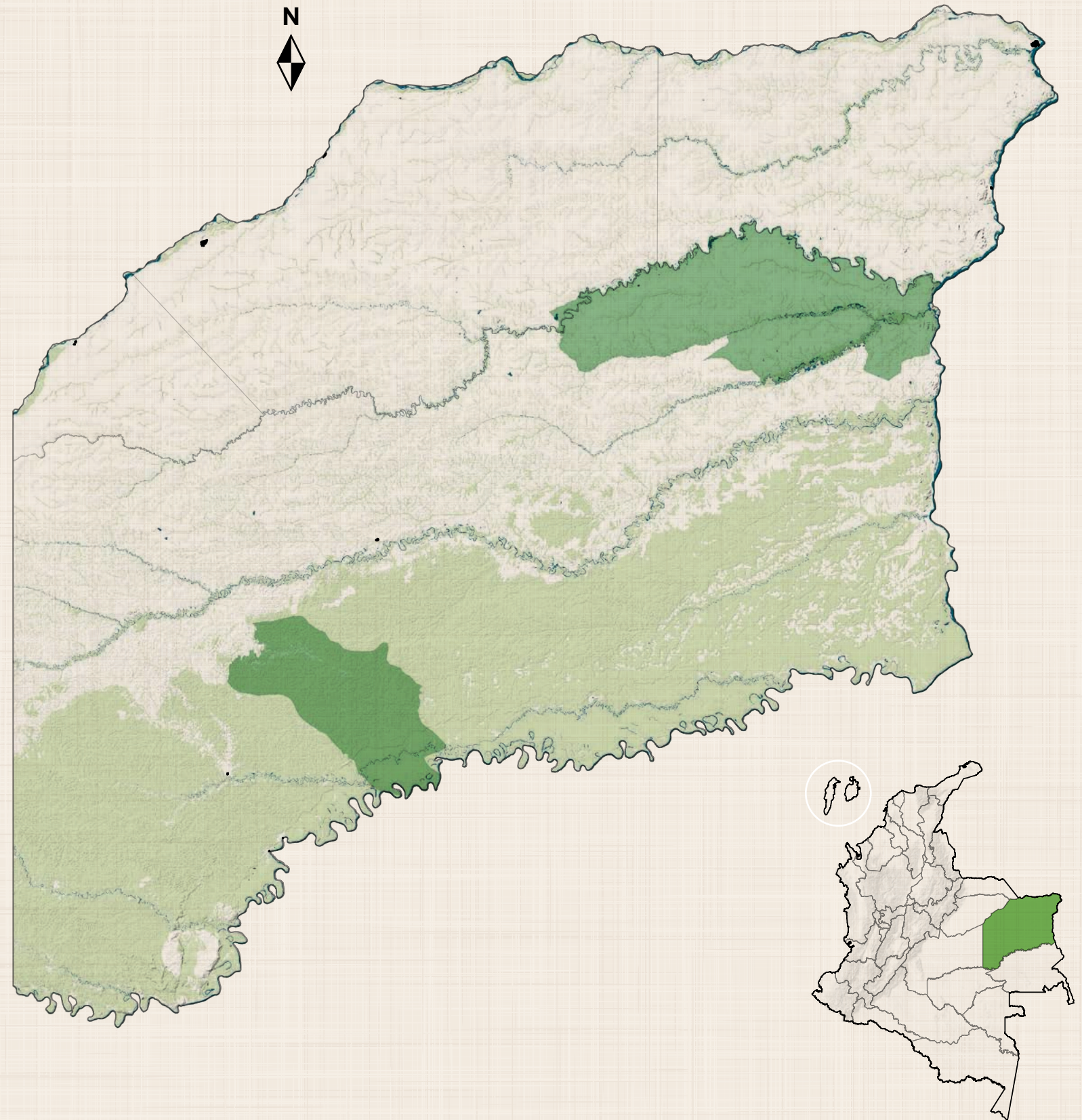
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Vichada

So finally, after more than 20 years of wanting to come here, I find myself in Puerto Carreño, in the Department of Vichada, right on the eastern border of Colombia with Venezuela. So, I decided to fly. I flew into San José this morning, really early. The flight from Bogotá left at 5:45 am I had a siesta and then came for a wind around, and I find myself on top of what they call “El Cerro De La Bandera” – ‘The Flag Top Hill’. I’m actually on the highest point in Puerto Carreño, possibly the highest point for definitely a few tens of kilometers around, and I’m about 70 meters above the height of the town. As far as the eye can see (I’ve got a 360-degree view) it’s just completely flat, but then you’ve got these little mounds that you can see in the distance at various points on this 360 degree view around the rock that I’m standing on, which are similar rocks to this one. And they’re the vestiges of the original Guiana Shield which I’ll talk about more tomorrow with my guide Roosevelt. But I’m standing on a piece of rock that’s millions, perhaps even hundreds of millions of years old. For now, I can say I’ve got an absolutely spectacular view from where I’m standing. So I’ve got, right now, where I’m standing, is on the banks of the river Orinoco; I’m looking over to the other side. The other bank is

Venezuela. I can see in the distance the river Bitá, which flows into the Orinoco just to the south of Puerto Carreño. And if I turn around and look north I can see the river Meta which flows from the Meta Department, which is the beginning of the Colombian Eastern Plains, and flows out into the river Orinoco right next to where I’m standing. I can see the joining of the rivers just over in one direction. So, I’m really looking forward to tomorrow. Finally made it to Puerto Carreño, always wanted to come here, easternmost point of Colombia; so I’m here and I’ll report back tomorrow on what I am up to with Roosevelt. Pretty nice, early start with him tomorrow, we are leaving at 6, so I’ll be back recording bright and early.



So I'm off to meet Roosevelt. It's just before 6 a.m. He recommended we set off early to avoid spending too much time in the midday heat, get most of our journeying on the river done in the morning, stop somewhere for lunch, enjoy the shade and then come back a little bit later once the heat has started to abate. I'm so excited we're gonna be going down the river Orinoco, somewhere I've always wanted to come. I don't know what it is: since I was small, the name has sounded poetic, it sounded like a place I have to come, and finally I've made it here. We're going to be going up river and on the way Roosevelt's going to be telling me about the places we pass, the places we see and the nature of life on the river.

And Roosevelt and I have just stopped at the union of the rivers Bita and Orinoco. Roosevelt tells me that the river Bita is a protected river and one of the only -if not the only- protected river. And I'm right to the point where the waters meet: the dark waters of the river Bita and the yellower colored waters of the river Orinoco; they haven't yet mixed, they mix a little bit further downstream. Now I ask Roosevelt what it means for a river to be



protected, and he basically says that the river has been designated as a Ramsar wetland and enjoys 250,000 protected hectares, which helps with the sustainability of the river Bita. Everybody who lives along the river, Roosevelt tells me, is responsible for its protection. There are also agencies which are dedicated to reforestation, and they're helping to reforest the areas around the river Bita. And then he tells me that just a little upriver we may be able to find the mythical pink dolphins that this part of the world is so famous for. So, we head off up, in search of the dolphins.

So Roosevelt ramped up the motor after we found the dolphins and he said "we're just gonna go fast for a bit because I want to take you up to a place called 'Ventanas'. And I can see why. We just... We were coming upriver, everything was very uniform, it's very wide, still, about a kilometer and a half, two kilometers wide from one bank to the



other. And then all of a sudden these large rock formations begin to appear, the largest of which is probably 50 or 60 meters high by three or four hundred meters wide just appearing up out of the jungle. And then they started appearing up out of the water as well, and so we just moored the boat at one of them in the middle of the Orinoco river, so I'm actually standing right in the middle of the river with Roosevelt.

So, that was really interesting. I asked Roosevelt to tell us a little bit about where he's brought me. I'll start with the last thing he said which was "this is such a beautiful, magical place, that, you know, we live here and whenever we come here it takes our breath away." And it's absolutely true. He got off the boat and the first thing he did, but you could see on his face, he was really enjoying, appreciating this sight of incredible natural beauty, and he... You know, Roosevelt's lived here his entire life and he takes his camera out and he starts taking photographs and making some videos, and it's really interesting to see this sort of real love and appreciation for his local area. How did these rocks form? What are we actually standing on right now in the middle of the river Orinoco? The granite rocks, which are left over from the Precambrian age; this actually at one time was a huge sandstone plateau sitting on top of the Guiana Shield. And over millions of years the sandstone has eroded away and it's left behind these granite formations which are from original lava flows. And as the sandstone eroded it left behind these granite formations that really are quite impressive.



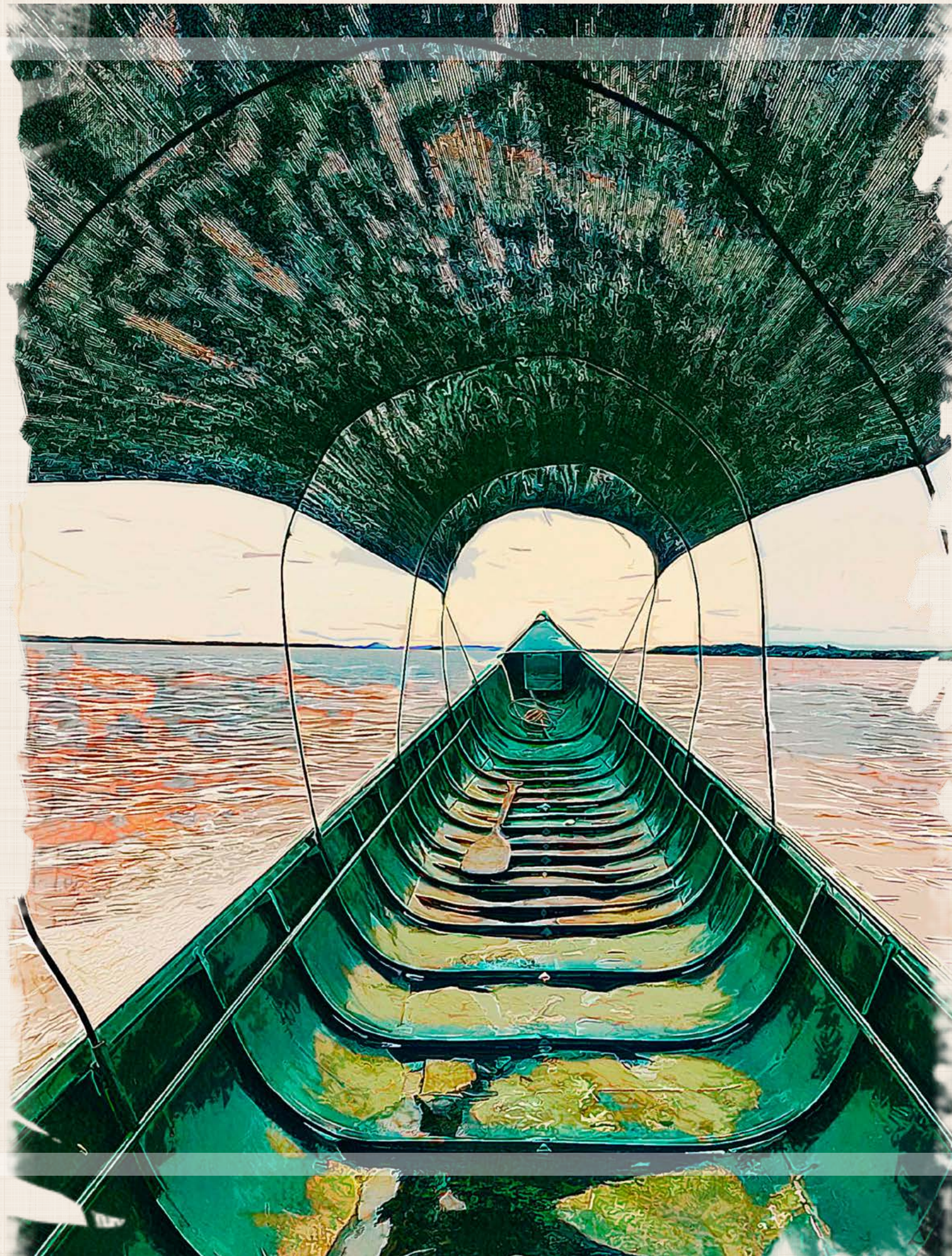


So, there's a stop in Casuarito, not just to say 'hi' to Roosevelt's cousin. We're also supposed to pick up a friend of his called 'El Tigre', who can help us as we navigate our way through the rapids. We can make it up this far with just one person on the outboard motor, but now for this next part El Tigre is our spotter, and El Tigre's job is to place himself in the front of the boat, basically, to help us avoid crashing into any rocks or being pulled into any kind of eddies which we wouldn't be able to get out of. So, yes, sounds like it's gonna be fun, emotional, exciting, scary.

So we're at the Atures rapids and they're quite a sight. Roosevelt tells me that they're just over 11 km long in their totality. We'll just come up a little way because it gets quite hairy from here on in. And, Roosevelt was just telling me a little bit about the name of the Orinoco river and its local mythology. The name comes from an ancient indigenous tribe, sadly long since disappeared from this area, and Orinoco means 'The Coiled Snake', and these rapids, depending on their state of aggression, were deemed to signify whether the snake was changing its skin or not. When the rapids were calm the snake was just in its normal state and when the rapids were high and furious, the snake was changing its skin, they used to say. So, Roosevelt takes people on trips to the Parque Nacional El Tuparro. El Tuparro is one of the hardest to reach and least visited of Colombia's National Parks. It's also one of the largest, and it sits on the banks of the river Orinoco; it's one of the only ways you can actually get to the park. So Roosevelt says we're about 30 km away here from the river entrance to the park and he said really the reason you go there is nature tourism. There are all sorts of paths that you can trek. There are a wide variety of flora and fauna that are relatively unique to

the park, and more than 300 species of birds, if birdwatching is your thing. The park is also completely covered with the rock formations that I've been talking about in Puerto Carreño, when we just stopped in the middle of the river, just sort of rising up out of the jungle that you can trek up or climb up to the top of and get a view of the surrounding areas. It sounds like a pretty impressive place to visit.

So I asked Roosevelt to talk a little bit about wider Vichada and opportunities for tourism, and he said –really, this look of mystery, mysticism and longing came into his eyes– and he said “well, really it's gotta be the Von Humboldt route.” Von Humboldt was an eminent biologist who in the beginning of the nineteenth century spent a good deal of time recording, charting, documenting Colombia's flora and fauna. And he came right through this area until, as Roosevelt mentioned to me earlier, he got held up by the rapids that we're standing next to right now. That sounds like a really well worth doing route. It's not too long either, five nights, six days, and it takes you right across the boundary between the jungle and the plains, which is where the Vichada comes from. So Roosevelt was explaining to me that the name Vichada itself is a name from an old indigenous language, and it means the boundary between the plains and the jungle. So, that the Humboldt route takes you right along this boundary and you eventually end up in Puerto Inírida which is in the department of Guainía, which is where I'll be going in the next few days. So it sounds like quite an impressive route, and 5 days, 6 nights; pretty doable.



I really enjoyed my day on the river Orinoco. Roosevelt was a great guide to have, really funny guy, full of lots of anecdotes and tips on what to do in the local area. But I have to say, I think the highlight of the day was our lunch on the way upriver, pulled over all of a sudden to one of the banks, and there was a family there clearing the land to build a house; a family from one of the local indigenous communities. And Roosevelt asked them if they could prepare some lunch for us and they said “yeah, sure,” you know. Off we went, I didn't really think anything more of it. A couple of hours later we came back downriver; we stopped off at the same place. And it turns out that after we left they've gone out and caught some fish –so, as fresh as can be –and then they prepared the fish in a very traditional way. They call it ‘pescado moquiado’. It's basically smoked fish. And we stood on the banks of the river eating this incredibly fresh, incredibly delicious smoked fish with a bowl of *farinha*, of the ground cassava dish which is very popular, very prevalent; it's a staple, part of the staple diet in this region. We stood on the banks of the river eating this fish and *farinha* with the guys that had just gone out and caught it for us. That was really special. And I asked Roosevelt if that's something typical that happens around here or if it was just for me and he said “no, anybody who comes here can have an experience like that, that's what the río Orinoco and Vichada are all about.”



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