

# STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Arauca

**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.

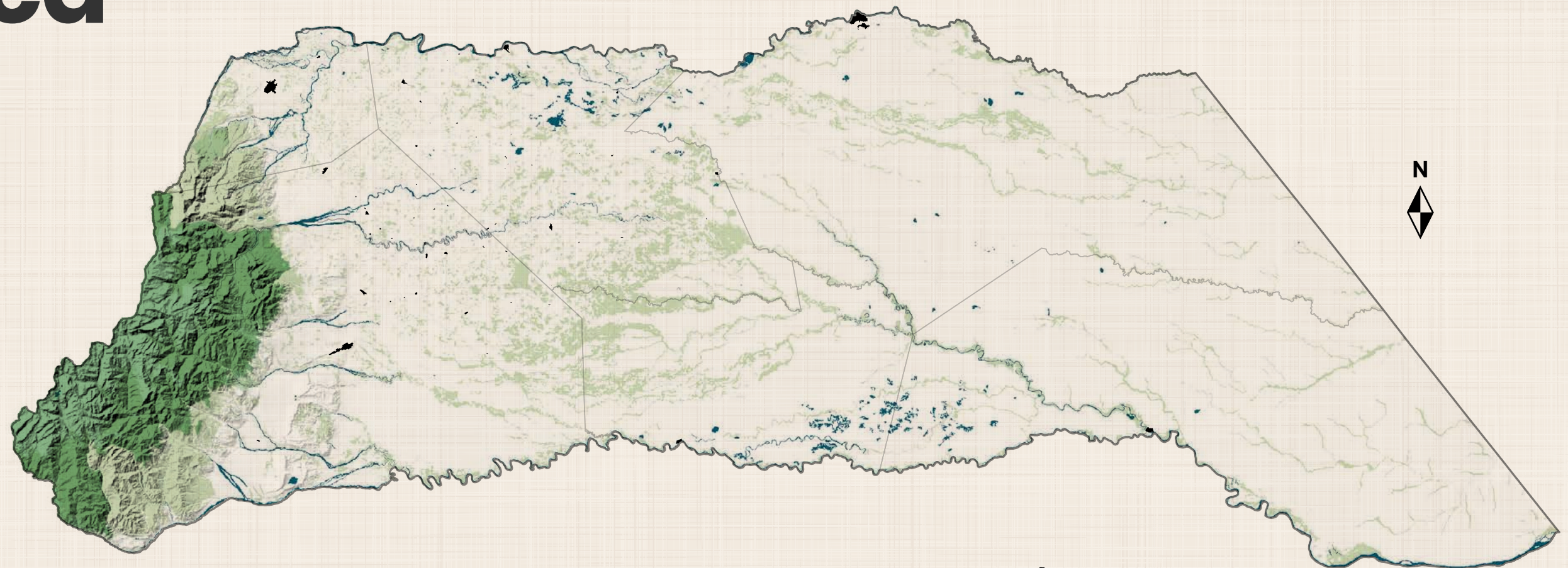
In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors 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.

# Arauca



And today I find myself in the department of Arauca, in northeastern Colombia. Landed this morning in the town of Arauca on the first flight, very early flight out of Bogotá. So, yeah, the department of Arauca. They call it the endless plains. Huge expanses of plains, savannahs, lots of cattle ranching, rice plantations, cocoa plantations as well. My guy Brian picked me up and is now taking me out to Hato Amaporita, which is a huge cattle ranch. We're going out, and we're gonna talk to some traditional cattle ranchers

and learn about how their business has developed. Arauca is known as a department of explorers. Frontiers people who would virtually wait through the mud until they found somewhere that was just dry enough to farm their cattle. So, yeah, looking forward to this. Sounds great. Let's go!



So we've got a full complement in the car today: Rafael my driver, Brian, who's my guide, and Trino, who's a rancher, and they call him Llanero, somebody from this region. Somebody who's gonna talk about traditions and how those traditions have adapted to modern times. And it's great to have them with me. I'll be interviewing them all, in a moment.

And it's interesting how the modern and the traditional combine in this department. So right now we're in a fairly new, posh, 4 by 4, which is what we need to drive down the road to get to the farm where we're going, and get really muddy. And quite difficult to access. We're driving on a paved road, is part of the national road system. And we'll drive past a couple of Llaneros, as in cowboys, effectively, on their horses. Wearing jeans nowadays, and a sort of knock-off goochy t-shirt or whatever. But they're still wearing a hat they would have been wearing if you'd come a hundred years ago. Exact same hat made in the exact same way. The way they saddle the horses, the stirrups that they use, the reigns, the style of riding has remained broadly similar across the decades, and in fact across the centuries as well. And that's what we'll be talking to Trino about, to find out how this has developed. Rafael is someone who's a number of times in his life done a fairly mythical journey. It's



a trek, which basically is to transport cattle from where they were raised on the plains of Arauca to the big marketplace of Villavicencio in the department of Meta, which is to the south of where we are now. And this is a mythical journey, which would take him between somewhere like 35 and 50 days, depending on how much rain, and how much mud there was. So Rafael's gonna talk to me a little bit about that. And Brian is a young guy. He's a guide, and he guides people on tours around the department. And his specialty is bird-watching, so he's gonna talk to us about the different species of birds we'll find in the department and the bird-watching opportunities there are to be had here. And so it sounds like it's going to be a great day.

So this is really interesting. I'm here with Trino. He's a local, born in Arauca. He said about 56 years ago, and a few days. And he said, "during the week I have a job in public office and in the weekend i'm a country farmer." Trino's actually a vet by trade and he said his dad was a small holder, a country farmer, and his dad said to him "this life is tough." "It's not the life I want for you. I want you to study." And so he became a vet. But he didn't want to kind of leave behind the past as it were. His dad live to 104 years old. Lived on the land we're walking through now. And he didn't want to leave all of that behind. He didn't want to forget all of that. So, yeah.



So Trino was telling me a little bit about... he said a couple of really interesting things. I asked him about changes that he's seen within his own lifetime. And the first thing he mentioned was really interesting and it was that, he said "we didn't use to have fences." He said the cattle had known that, but the land didn't, and so cattle were free to run and you just knew who's cattle it was cuz it would all be branded according to who the owner was. Now, it's just fences everywhere and since the road arrived, everyone started putting up fences and he's not too keen on that. A positive change, though, that he's seen. He said in recent years they've been enjoying a real boom in cattle ranchings. The prices have been great as much for milk as for beef. So local ranchers, and people working within cattle ranching have enjoyed a fairly stable life and what he said it was a boom, in fact, of the last 15 years.

So Trino was telling me about these huge migrations of cattle. His dad told him stories all his life about these migrations and these would happen, Trino tells me, up until, right about the early 1970s. The road infrastructure was very poor. It was very difficult to transport the cattle by river. So they would have to be literally moved across the land and they would take them in what they call Rodeos, which were groups of about a thousand head of cattle per Rodeo. Each group would have 16 Cowboys. They'd have a cook. You were risking everything. You were risking your livelihood, and you could have your cattle stolen, you were risking your own life. You could die in an accident on the way. You could meet bandits on the way who could take your life from you. So it wasn't an easy trick. I mean, it's just it's dangerous, but it was also incredibly long. We're talking something in the region of 500 km across land with no roads. So these guys were taking groups of a thousand heads of cattle across 500km. It would take them anything up to 40 days. They would have to take all of their food. They would have to find water along the way, obviously. And in total this was just per group. So I asked Trino, I said, "how many head of cattle would be being moved any one time in all of the different groups?" And he said his dad used to tell him a story about this one year, when the river Casanare grew. And they couldn't cross it. So they had to just wait for the waters to abate. And his dad said that that year, there were fifty thousand head of cattle waiting to cross. And this is why, although today, I mean, obviously things



have changed, the roads are paved, farmers have trucks and Loris that come and pick up the cattle and drive them to market. But this is why, if you come to this part of the world, people will still talk about these migrations in a very animated way, because they were so fundamental to their development.

So I'm here with Pedro, who's also known as El Llanero Legendario, an artist named the Legendary Cowboy, and he's a musician and an artisan. And his music is very much the traditional style of Los Llanos. So I asked him how those styles were shaped by the original Cowboys and these huge migrations of cattle to take them to market, and he said, "well, that's that's exactly what it was." I mean, you would finish your day and he said, "the musicians would take their instruments out and they would play and sometimes dance and sing, and that would reflect what they'd been doing during the day." And then he said something really interesting. He said "and they would also sing to the cattle," and he said, "it's a bit like an anesthetic." So if the cattle were restless, or if the cows needed milking, the Llanero musician would sing to the cattle, and it calms them, apparently.

So I asked Pedro about his name, Legendary Cowboy, El Legendario Llanero. And he said something... he's really humbling. He said, "I didn't choose that name cuz I'm saying, I'm a legend." "I chose that name because I come from the Llanero legend." "I was born on this farm." He was born, literally, just a few meters away from where we're talking right now. He grew up herding cattle. He grew up as the cattle were being slaughtered, helping with the slaughter. His hands got dirty from an early age.

So Brian's a tour guide, Ambitour, Arauca. He's been kind enough to sort this day of kind of Llanero exploration out for us. And I asked him if this is being done especially for me or if this is something that he would do with tourists. Usually people are interested in different musical styles and hearing them in situ. And he said, "yeah, absolutely, that's what we do." "We take people to have experiences, in as authentic as possible circumstances, as well as these Llanero kind of cowboy music experiences. Brian's also a keen bird-watcher, and I'm gonna ask him a little bit later to talk to me about the bird watching opportunities.

So I just decided to go for a little wander with Brian and went to the farm this morning, we had a nice lunch, we spent a lot of the day in the car. So we've just come out for a walk. And I thought I'd ask while we were walking about Brian's own personal passion, which is bird watching. He knows a huge amount, all day, he's been telling me about the different birds we've been hearing. I'm going to ask him in a moment to tell me what we're seeing now and why he's brought me down this road. And Brian, actually, right about the time he started working in tourism, he started to produce a



guide to the bird life of Arauca. And he's charted many hundreds of species, photographed them himself and produced a guide. And also something which is really interesting is because, although Arauca is known as being a very flat plains region of Colombia, Arauca actually has a fairly large segment of foothills and then mountains. The foothills going up to the Sierra Nevada de Cocuy, which is famous for being part of Boyacá. And I found out myself today, it's actually... somewhere in the region of 30% of Cocuy is actually in Arauca. So you've got a wide variety of bird watching opportunities ranging from days spent in the plains, in the heat of the low plains, as well as going up the foothills and then up to somewhere close to 5,000 meters. So you've got all sorts of different bird species existing within the department.



Well, I can truly say that I had an amazing day. Exploring the plains of Arauca, talking to Brian, a new generation, about initiatives and his hope for tourism. Moving forward, talking to Trino about traditional cattle ranching and wandering through the fields with Trino and Pedro, as Pedro sang traditional songs and called the cows over for Trino to feed them. And then going visiting a community, cocoa production facility. Really, it was an absolutely amazing day. It really gave me a feel for what Arauca has to offer. And I can certainly say I want to come back and definitely recommend that you come here too.





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