

# STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Cauca

**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.

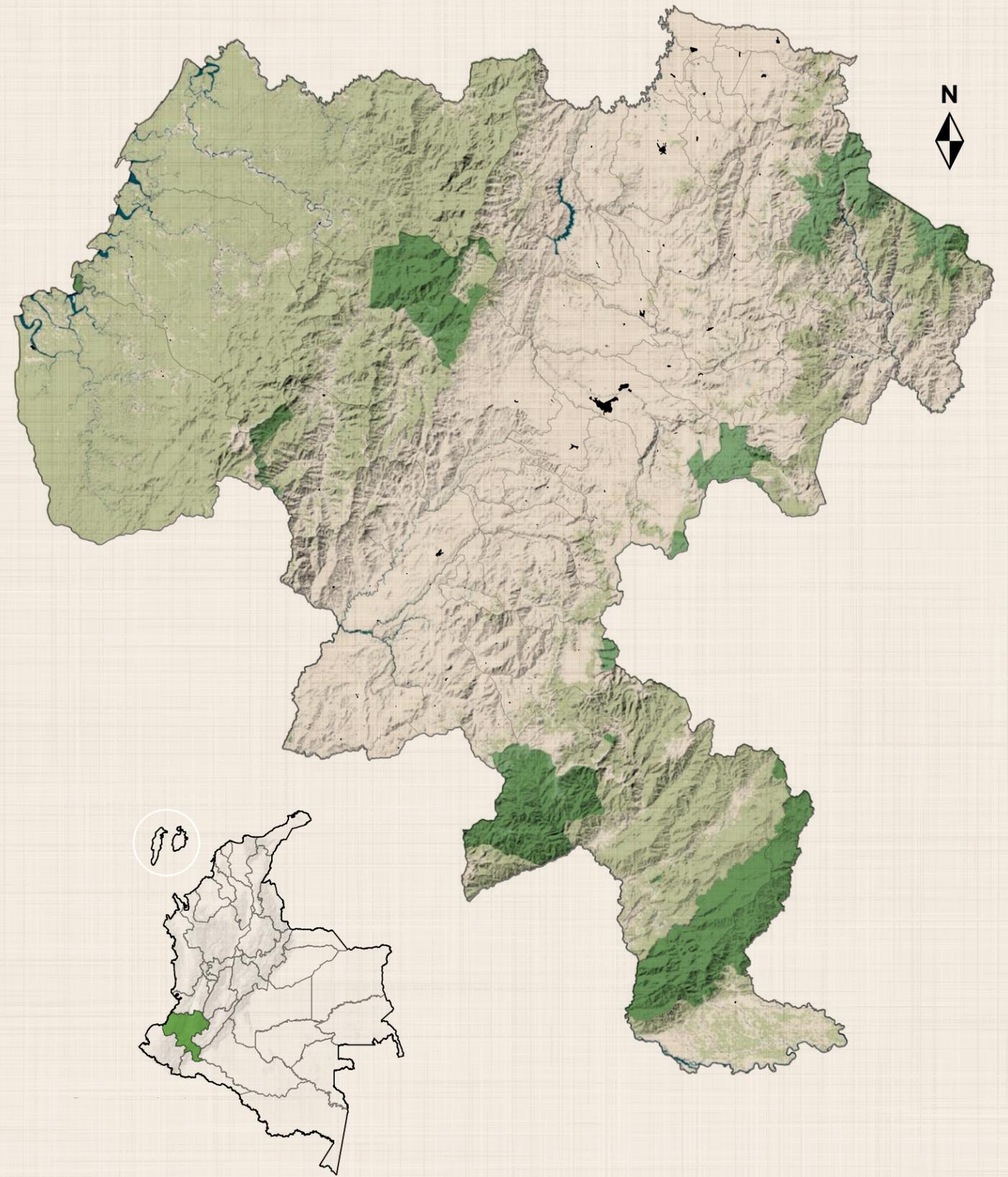
Colombia has something for everyone.

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.

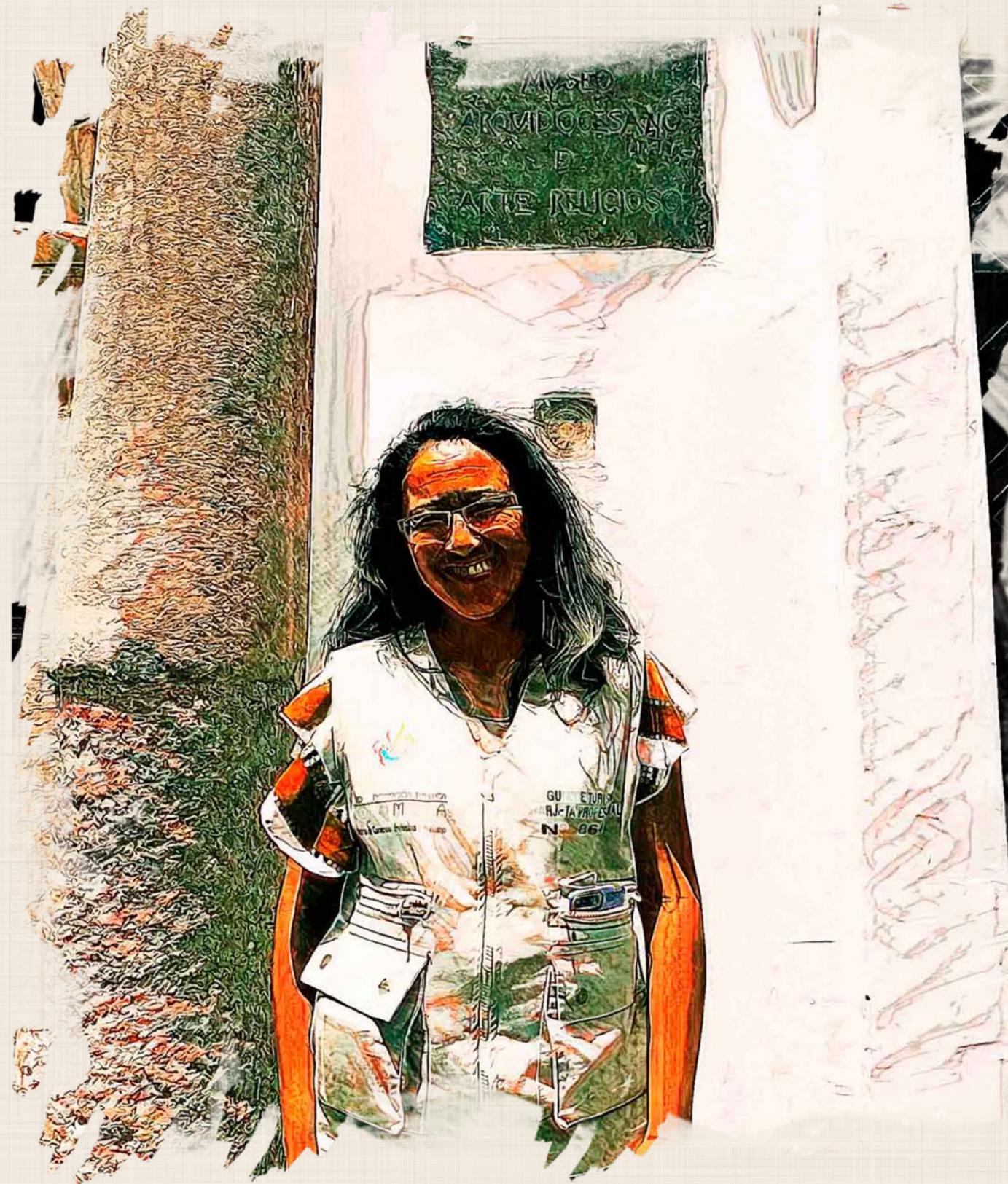
# Cauca

So today I find myself in Popayán. I was in Nariño yesterday, in La Cocha, and then I drove to El Bordo, which is just in Cauca, the Department of Cauca —which is the subject of today's episode —and woke up this morning in Bordo, and then drove down a really narrow winding mountain road for a couple hours and I found myself in Popayán. And I just met my contact here, my guide, Sandra Mellizo. Sandra is a professional guide and we're sitting in Popayán's Central Park, which is a lovely oasis of calm in the middle of Popayán.



So Sandra's a professional guide, she's been guiding people in Popayán for the last 20 years, she says; and she formalized her profession in 2004 when she became a licensed, official licensed guide and I asked her where this all began, what got her interested in it. And she was actually studying to be a fashion designer, she was in Cali studying and—something we're gonna be talking about in a moment is the Holy Week celebrations in Popayán. Popayán is a very religious city, and somebody mentioned something about Semana Santa to Sandra and she got interested, and she came and began looking through the historical record and she started to find these stories about her own city that she wasn't aware of. And she said she just got really, really interested in the stories and then decided that she wanted to share them.

This is a really interesting part of Popayán's history. Popayán actually sits on a geological fault and there are faults surrounding Popayán. There are volcanoes around Popayán, so it's an area of a huge amount of seismic activity. Earthquakes and tremors are a completely normal part of life here. But there've been some big ones: there was one in the eighteenth century, but the ones that I think are interesting to focus on are the 1982 and 1983 earthquakes. Especially, Sandra tells me, the one in 1983. In 1983 there was a 6.7 on the Richter Scale earthquake which basically razed the city to the ground. And during the whole process of reconstruction in 1985, Popayán was designated a National Monument. And what this did was free up funds and provided a legislative framework that meant, as the city was rebuilt, it had to be rebuilt to respect the original architecture. So, as you walk around, unless you know you would never guess that this city has been very carefully and beautifully reconstructed.



And I think it's a testament to the importance that was placed on preserving this National Monument, and it's also really a shining example of what can be done in terms of conservation, preservation and rebuilding in a very seismic zone, which is subject to a regular strong earthquakes, and what can be done with the right will. And what that's done is, it's meant that Popayán has been able to maintain and really build on its status as a National Monument to be a very, very attractive tourism destination. And just wandering around Popayán, like I said, you'd never guess that these buildings were reconstructed.

So I asked Sandra: I've arrived here, walked out of my hotel, had a wind around the city and I've contracted her as a guide. So, where would we meet and what would we do in Popayán? And she said "we'd usually meet right here, in the Parque Caldas," and she said "one of the first places that you usually visit on a walking tour is the Puente del Humilladero," which roughly translated would be 'The Bridge of Shame'. So I obviously asked her why is it called The Bridge of Shame, and she said "well, originally it was the way in into the city. So, anyone who'd come into the city would have to come across the bridge, and most of the people coming into the city regularly were country farmers

bringing their produce into Popayán, and so they would be very heavily loaded down. A lot of them would be walking with their produce on their backs, and the bridge is built on an incline. So, as you walk over the bridge, the incline means you have to sort of double over, especially if you're heavily loaded down; and this doubling over may put people into this position of sort of shame or humiliation, in a religious sense. Or... Looked as if they were feeling humiliated or were feeling shameful and became known as 'The Bridge of Shame' because of the position that it forces you into as you're walking over with a heavy load." And so, one of the other things that we'll have time to do today, that Sandra always takes people to is the San Francisco Church which we'll talk about in a moment. So, interesting sight for a number of different reasons.

So I asked Sandra something really interesting in terms of her introduction to Popayán is that, yeah, she mentions two churches and a bridge whose name has very strong religious — Catholic, definitely — allusions. And I also know that Popayán is a site of religious pilgrimage; there are also huge celebrations around Holy Week, which we'll talk about in a moment. So, I asked Sandra to talk to me a little bit about this religious aspect of Popayán and she said "really, I mean, the first thing to understand is that Popayán has a huge number of churches." Just in the historic center of Popayán, which is no more than 70 city blocks — a city block is a hundred meters by a hundred meters — there are thirteen churches, so there's a huge number of churches in a very concentrated area. And the historic center would have been the size of Popayán in its original colonial days. So, the entire city was full of churches. And over the years that's meant that Popayán has become a very important Roman Catholic religious center in Colombia.





Sandra just told me something really interesting because one tends to, I think — I definitely did, when I heard the term religious tourism, I imagined devout Roman Catholics visiting churches — but she said that also it's not just about going to pray in a church. She said the churches are full of amazing art. And also it's very interesting art because it's art that's very often produced by untrained artists. So, these are artisans that are self-taught. And as the churches were being built they produced some really beautiful works of art, and there's also a museum of religious art here in Popayán, a very important religious art museum. So, the religious tourism after all doesn't just mean going from church to church to pray; it's about going to explore what religion means and the artistic production around religion, which she says is something that she believes that you don't have to be a Roman Catholic to be able to appreciate.

So I asked Sandra to tell us a little bit about what a typical procession in Holy Week in Popayán looks like. Basically, what she told me was that the Holy Week was about processions and she said that each day, from Tuesday to Saturday, there's a specific procession. There are nighttime processions as well, which is probably quite nice because it's not really a

hot city, but the sun gets really intense during the day. We just keep moving around the park, actually, as we're looking for the shade as the sun moves while we're talking. So, nighttime processions I can see being really... Actually really comfortable in Popayán as the temperature falls a little bit. And she said that basically what the processions are about is a group of people carrying a huge wooden platform, very intricately carved wooden platform, upon which is placed a statue of an important religious figure. And each day is a different part of the Easter celebrations and the platforms are decorated with flowers, and each day the color of the flowers changes to represent something different as we move across the different points of our Easter week. Until we get to Saturday, where the platform's decorated with multi-colored flowers, which is about the celebration of the Resurrection. So, each day the procession leaves and returns to a different church in Popayán and, yeah, that's it. It's about parading these religious icons around the city and reflecting on the importance of each of the days in Holy Week.

So, after spending a lovely morning with Sandra in Popayán, talking about Popayán's gorgeous architecture and, regardless of whether you're a practicing Roman Catholic or not, beautiful place to visit just to appreciate the architecture.





I then drove from Popayán, I've just driven over to a place called Silvia. Silvia is known as a center of indigenous handicrafts but I'll leave my guest to explain all of that to us.

I just asked Viviana to introduce herself, which she did, and asked her a little bit about her origins. Viviana belongs to a local indigenous community. The indigenous group is called the Misak, and she was born in a reserve which is called Guambia. Her dad is Misak indigenous, and her mom is from the Department of Nariño, and from a very young age her dad really pressed on her and their family the importance of their roots and recognizing their roots.

So Viviana has business with three different areas: one is the handicrafts business – and we'll talk about that briefly in a moment; the second area is a tourism business, tour guide business, and she takes tourists all over Cauca but really focusing on Silvia, which is her hometown; and the third area is that she has an extra space in her home where people can come and stay. She said she's had people come to stay, they are interested in learning about her culture, cultural traditions and also the way that handicrafts are made traditionally in Viviana's community. And she's had people staying from a couple of days to weeks and even a couple of months in some cases learning about the handicrafts and the community.

So, Viviana's business is actually the very first tourism agency in her community. What they really focus on is community-based tourism, and it really is about taking people into her community. People who are interested in learning about different forms and ways of living, taking people into the community, introducing them to people in the community, generating spaces for interaction and the sharing of ideas within the community, bringing ideas into the community and the

community sharing their ideas and their ways of life with people. She's more than happy to sit people down and show them how she weaves or how she makes one of her bead necklaces, and it's really important to her and her community to be able to share their way of life with others. She also takes people, literally out, to people's vegetable patches where they have organic vegetable patches so they can eat some fruit off the trees and... So, she said "It's very much... It's a living experience, it's about living with us in the way that we live." And she said something else really interesting is that one of the things that the people are often curious about is why the women in her community dress the way they do, for example. So it's all about breaking down perhaps stereotypes, explaining the rationale behind things. For example, I didn't understand the significance of color in Misak dress, up until very recently; a few minutes ago Viviana explained to me the significance of color. So what she's wearing right now is a black skirt which the representation of the Mother Earth, *Pachamama*, and her Poncho is blue on the outside, representing the water, which gives life; and red on the inside, which is this constant reminder of the blood that was shed in her community, and her hat.

So I asked Viviana why she chooses to dress the way she does. She's a young woman and she chooses to dress in a very traditional style, the way that women in her community have been dressing for hundreds of years; she hasn't chosen to put on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. And she says "it's because I'm proud of who I am! It represents who I am, it represents the struggle to obtain our basic rights, the right to live the way that we want. And that's why I dress in a way that reflects my community in the most traditional way possible."





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