

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Santander

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.

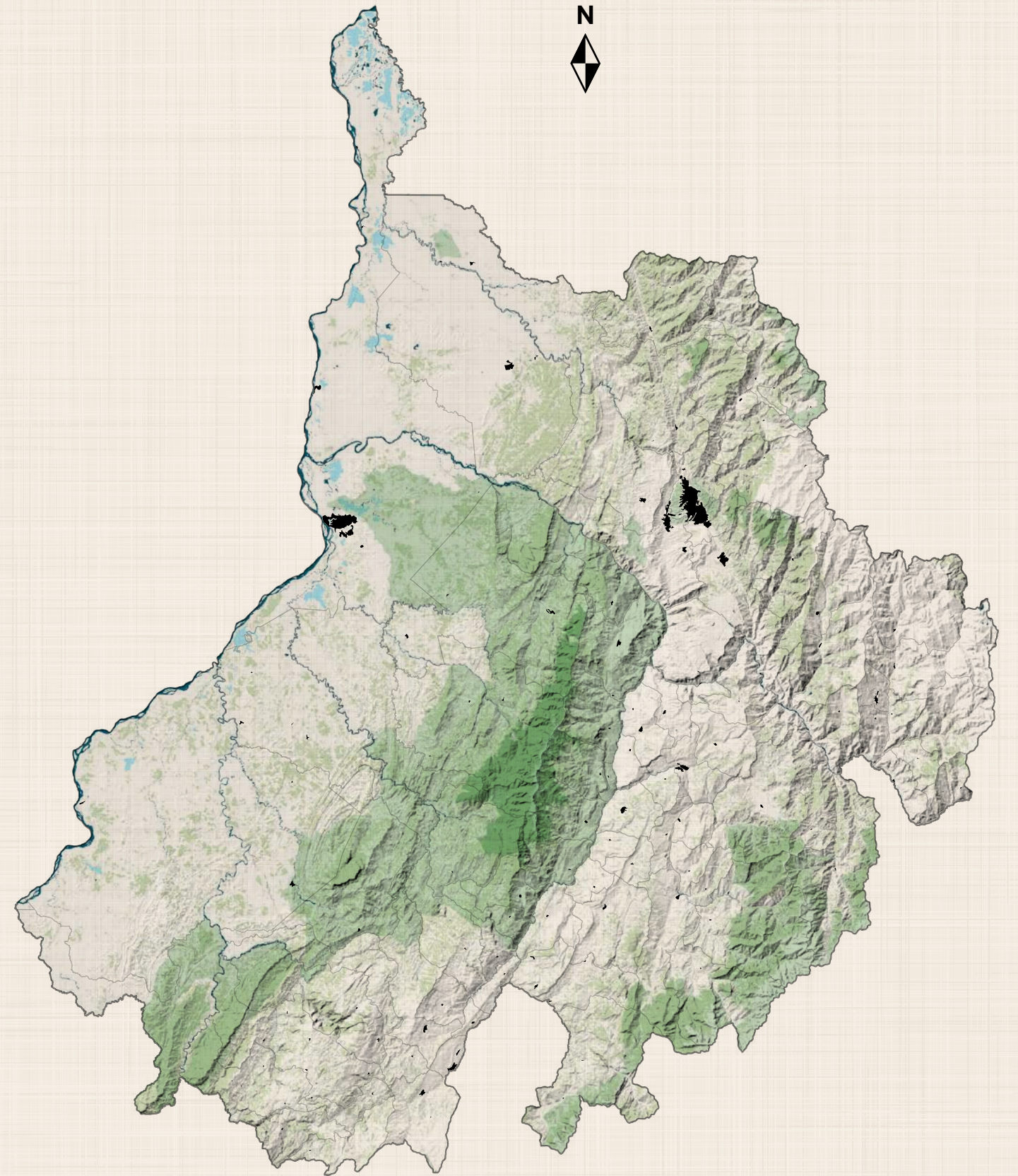
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I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.

Santander

In this episode of the podcast I find myself in the picturesque little town of Barichara, in the department of Santander, northeastern Colombia. Barichara is a lovely little town nestled in the mountains. People call it a mini Villa de Leyva, but I think that's not really fair. Barichara has its own particular style, cobblestone streets lined, colonial houses. The whole town is kept in a really original state. There's very little new development, very little visible new development as you find in other towns in the area. And, yeah, just heading off to meet my guide, Román. And Román's going to take me for a walking tour of Barichara, find some nice places to sit and have a chat about what Barichara has to offer, as well as the department of Santander in general. Really looking forward to it.



—¿Román?

Román: Sí.

—¿Hola, qué tal?

Román: Mucho gusto.

—Mucho gusto. Nick.

Román: ¿Cómo te fue en el viaje?

—Bien, bien, sí.

Román: Bueno, pero ya estás aquí.

—Exacto, eso es lo importante.

So, my guide, Román Sarmiento just arrived. And now we're gonna go on a walking tour of Barichara. I'm looking forward to it. Also, he mentions that we're currently in a festival that is a festival of... a corn or maze festival which is strangely... the first thing I asked him was whether we could go and find an authentic Santander arepa. Santander is famous for having a very unique style of making arepas. For my money, they're some of the most delicious arepas in the whole of Colombia.

Román: Muy bien. Mi nombre es Román Sarmiento

And just as we go up to the main square, just to explain, Román is a local resident, lived her, born here, lived here all of his life. And he spends most of his time growing coffee in a region in which interestingly, it is different to other regions of Colombia where there are two harvests each year. There's one large harvest and one sort of intermediate harvest. In Santander, in this part of Santander, because of the rain patterns and the weather, the harvests are only once a year. And Román spends most of his time looking after his





family's coffee plantation. I'll talk to him a little bit more about that later on. And before I do that, just to tell you why, Román told me that the local residents are known as yellow feet and this is for historical reasons. When people used to spend most of their time barefoot, it's a fairly warm part of the world. We're at about one 1300 meters above sea level, so it never gets cold and never gets too hot, either. And the local soil is very rich in clay. So as people spent most of their lives working on the clay rich soils, which have a very yellow tint to them, the skin on their feet would absorb the yellow pigments. And they became known as yellow feet, and still to this day people in Barichara are known as yellow feet. Really interesting.

👤 Román: Pues, verás, Nick, es de todo un poco, realmente...

When I came into the town today, so I drove in here, it's really striking. The streets are cobbled, but they're not cobbled in a way that I've seen in very, many other places, or I think, anywhere else. They're huge slabs of stone, probably a meter long by 30, 40 cm wide, which is very different to most places, which use quite small stone. And the streets are lined with colonial houses, very well-preserved houses in a very original state. So I asked Román why this was, if this was an active decision on the part of the inhabitants of the town. And he said "no, actually, it was a historical accident in a way, in the sense that Barichara's never been a particularly rich town, and in the 1960s most towns like Barichara, in Colombia, were ripping up their stone paved streets to pave them with asphalt... tarmac, which is much cheaper and much easier to replace. And Barichara didn't have the money to do that. And so the local residents felt very much left behind. Very... Like their village... they hadn't been able to modernize their village. And this feeling persisted until the mid-1970s when,

in 1975, the then president Alfonso López Michelsen came to visit Barichara, and he was absolutely fascinated by what he found. And people began to ask him to help with the financing to pave the streets. And he said “no, I’m not going to do that.” He said “you need to keep this place like it is. It’s an absolute jewel in Santander.” And he declared the town a national monument. And since then the town has had to maintain its cobbled streets, but it’s now become the sort of signature trademark of Barichara. It’s one of the few towns in this area, if not one of the only towns in this area that still keeps these really interesting streets cobbled by huge stones. And something which makes it much easier to do this, as Román was explaining to me, is there are a lot of quarries in the area, sort of open cast mining. And stones... it is mining for stones, precisely for construction. So they have in their local area easy access to the stones they need to replace and renovate the streets as needed. Which is also why Barichara is very famous for its stone work. As you come in to the town, all over the town, there are shops selling all sorts of different stone work, statues, bird baths and all sorts of other things, which are made out of the local stone.

So I ask Román, basically a very open question: why do people come to Barichara? And he said one of the big attractions of Barichara are the arts and crafts. There are traditional weavers that use the ancient guane technique of the original inhabitants of this land. Lots of pottery, which he said... especially the pottery used to make the Santanderiano arepas. And obviously the stone work, as well. And we’re just gonna take a wander around the village, and see what we find.

So we just popped into Barichara’s impressive central church, right on the town’s square. Obviously, built out of local stone and built out of huge stone blocks. The construction



dates back to the early 1720s, Román tells me. And it's quite impressive, in terms of the the stone block construction. And the most impressive thing of all, I think are the columns holding up enormous archways that stretch high above us, 10, 15 odd meters above us. And the columns, which are somewhere in the region of 3 or 4 meters tall, are all carved out of one solid block of stone. They're not multiple pieces that have been carved to fit together. So the most enormous pieces of stone were found in the local quarries and rivers, Román tells me, and then carved in one piece to form these huge columns. And they all look identical to my untrained eye. The roof rises high above us, as I said, 15 odd meters above us, when they're exposed. And a wooden structure. Lots of light. Very airy. A very impressive structure. And the doorway of the church, I was just going to say before we leave, is a really impressive carved wooden structure. And I was trying to get an idea of size. I'm almost 2 meters tall... somewhere in the region of 6 or 7 meters tall, two enormous doors, intricately carved with beautiful leaf-type patterns by some of the local craftspeople, many, many years ago. And as you walk out there's a gorgeous view over the town's square, which is a beautiful grass-covered square full of trees, the leaves rustling in the breeze of the mid-afternoon, and a view over across to the other side of the valley. Really, it's very beautiful.

So we just popped into, what Román tells me was his school. It was the school where he studied and it's now the local arts and trades institute, which is part of a series of institutes in different parts of Colombia, that have really clear arts and trades heritage. It's one of 12 and they're overseen by the ministry of culture. This particular one in Barichara has 3 principal workshops. One is the pottery workshop, which is where we're standing right now. The other is the textiles workshop, which



is just across the courtyard from us. And then on the other side of the building, there is the culinary workshop. And so people can come here and learn really hands-on trades. Be they arts, textiles, pottery, cookery and you'll learn really traditional techniques. So Román tells me that these institutes were all set up to celebrate, and sort of resurrect and ensure the continuity of old, sometimes ancient local techniques. And show they're not lost to the race of mechanization and modernity. So you can come here and learn how to make traditional clay pots. You can learn and... Come here and learn how to weave in the traditional guane style, and you can come and learn how to cook the traditional Santander dishes, including the arepa which I keep on talking about. I'm getting more and more hungry for an arepa, as I talk. So, at some point I'm gonna have to drag Román to... he said there's a lady he knows who can do us the best arepa in town. And these institutes are a fantastic way of helping local young people to discover, re-discover, or perfect skills that they... they've already learned in their homes, in a more commercial formalized sense.

So I just popped into the tienda and met a lovely lady, Sol Ángel. And she runs the store and she started telling me about it. And so I asked her to tell us in her own voice, what the store is, and what she does here.

👤 Sol Ángel: Bueno, mi nombre es Sol Ángel Rodríguez Calderón..

So Sol Ángel was telling me that she runs a shop. Basically her mission, her vision is to highlight ancient local trades and crafts and



techniques. And provide trades people with a place to sell their products. So, it's not just the maintenance of ancient techniques. It's actually giving people a livelihood by highlighting these techniques, and giving them a place to display their products and to sell their products. So, she showed me a traditional guane weaved bag which traditionally was made using material here called fique, which is from an Andean plant. It's broadly similar to hemp in its structure and the way that it can be woven into cloth. And... but what she showed me is a cotton-based weave. Because as the bags and products made out of fique started to become popular, people soon realized that apparently fique provokes allergies in quite a lot of people. And so they found that they could do a similar weave with cotton. The weave is done on a vertical loom, in all sorts of different designs and different ways. What Sol Ángel's trying to do is give an outlet to people producing all sorts of different local products. So as you walk around the store, there's pottery, traditional pottery from huge vases down to tiny coffee, cups. There are bags of all sorts of descriptions. All sorts of different weaves. Hammocks made from fique and other materials. There are table placemats, hats, the traditional alpargata, the traditional shoe, which is broadly similar to the Spanish espadril in terms of finding a comparison. But there's also locally-produced coffee. There's honey, there's all sorts of different things. So the Tienda Ancestral is definitely a great place to visit if you want to get a cross-section of all of the different arts and crafts that you can find here in Barichara.

👤 Nick: Sol Ángel, nuevamente, muchas gracias.



So just as we came over to have a look down to the canyon of the Río Suárez, which is the Spanish colonial name. But it was actually originally called the Saravita river. And so I asked him, you know, if you want to leave town, go and do something different, some nature tourism, hiking what would you do? And he said, actually there's a network, and this is fascinating for me personally. Barichara is connected to many of the surrounding towns and villages by a network of ancient paths. We're talking paths which have been walked by the original inhabitants of these lands for thousands of years. Paths which probably tracked the route of the original migrations which brought the very first people to these lands, millennia ago. So there

are a number of different routes. Román mentioned one if you're just looking for a day hike from Barichara out to Guane, which is a neighboring municipality. It's about 7km, it's a fairly easy walk. You can take lunch, and go on a nice, gentle walk. Or you can go much further, if you're a hiker looking for multi-day, even multi-week hikes, you can hike out following these ancient paths for hundreds of kilometers, literally.

So I asked Román if the ways are in a decent state of repair. As a hiker myself I know that you sometimes find ways which are really overgrown and it can be quite hard to work out where the route's actually taking you. And he said that it's a bit of everything, but

in general, yep. And the one that he really recommends, and his eyes light up when he talks about it is the route to Zapatoque. And he said it's about a 10 hour hike, and there's a place you can stay on the way. You can walk out one day and walk back to Barichara the next day. And something else I also forgot to mention, he said on the Saravita river there's lots of adventure tourism, so if you're into rafting, kayaking, there's all sorts of opportunities for those activities on the Saravita river. And Barichara is where you find out the information for all of this. So if you're feeling really adventurous, you know, just ask somebody to point you the way to Zapatoque. But if you need a little bit more guidance, in Barichara, the tour agencies I would

recommend... Ramón, a great guy, really friendly, really open to sharing information. And so you can find all of this information at adventure tourism agencies in Barichara, and then use this as a base to go out hiking into these gorgeous mountains, down ancient trails which have been used for millennia by all sorts of different populations which have passed through this area. Gorgeous place, we're just reaching the end of the afternoon, looking over the canyon. And if you're a cyclist, Román tells me that there's a great cycling community here. There's all sorts of cycling events across the year and loads of cyclists, so there's routes, there's road routes from here to Bucaramanga. Like I mentioned before, it's a great route, I drove down it today, but



I'm definitely going to come back on my bike and do that. There's also... the off road here is what it's all about. There's more dirt tracks than paved tracks. So if you're a mountain biker, a gravel cyclist, there's opportunities for that as well. It's a beautiful part of the world. I highly recommend it. And another thing Román said, which I can say, you get a feeling when you visit so many places, he said it's really safe and gentle around here, and I can definitely say there's a feeling of safeness, a feeling of gentleness. People are happy to see you. They smile, there's a sort of calmness about the way that people walk around the streets. And I might sound strange to say something sort of unscientific and abstract. But you just... you feel it. Come here, and you'll find out for yourself.

So I just finished my walk around Barichara with Román. We're just wandering back to my hotel, and the last light of the afternoon... stars are coming out. So, half moon shining down on us and it really is an absolutely gorgeous little town in the mountains of Santander. Just walking back down the main street, down these huge stone cobbles. These beautiful, incredibly well-preserved colonial houses on either side with their whitewashed walls, and wooden framed windows with their wooden bars to protect from the non-existent criminals in this town. There's palm trees in people's gardens. There's also Andean mountain vegetation. It's quiet. It's peaceful. The sort of place you just want to come and spend a few days, wandering around, eating local food, checking out the local handicrafts. Going on a hike. I'd never been here before. I'm really sad that I'm only here for 18 hours. I'm gonna come back as soon as I can and spend a bit of time here. Got a lovely feel to it.



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