

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Norte de Santander

Stories from the Heart of Colombia
A podcast by Procolombia

Editorial committee

María José Silva
 Julia Correa Vásquez
 Paola Méndez Rodríguez

Editorial direction

Andrés Barragán Montaña

Graphic design

Mateo L. Zúñiga
 Andrés Álvarez Franco
 Cristine Villamil Ramírez

Illustration

Andrea Santana Quiñones
 Diana Londoño Aguilera

Edition

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

Original Locution

Nick Perkins

Original photos

Photos 1, 2 y 3: Nick Perkins

Photo 4: JotaMaick (Photographer). *Espeletia, cuyos miembros son comúnmente conocidos como frailejones, es un género de la familia de las Asteráceas, nativa de Colombia, Venezuela y Ecuador.* [imagen digital]. Extradited from <https://https://www.shutterstock.com/es/image-photo/espeletia-whose-members-commonly-known-frailejones-1479599579>

Photo 5: Delgado C., Sebastian (Photographer). *A bird at the San-*

turbán Paramo. [imagen digital]. Extradited from <https://www.shutterstock.com/es/image-photo/bird-paramo-1567041415>

Photo 6: Delgado C., Sebastian (Photographer). *un cuerpo de agua bajando por la montaña en el páramo de Santurbán en Colombia.* [imagen digital]. Extradited from <https://www.shutterstock.com/es/image-photo/body-water-coming-down-mountain-paramo-1072489895>

This editorial article has been prepared by ProColombia. Its content is protected by the laws of the Republic of Colombia on intellectual property and does not reflect the position of the National Government, ProColombia or the entities that have intervened in the project, so they will not assume any responsibility for what is expressed there.

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.

Norte de Santander

And so here we are. I've been traveling around Colombia for two months. I find myself in the last of the thirty two departments of Colombia, that I'm visiting on this trip, in Norte de Santander. Actually, precisely at the moment I'm in Santander, because to get to where I'm going in Norte de Santander, we have to get there from Santander. I'm in the municipality of Vetas, I stayed last night in the beautiful town of Vetas. Set sort of on terraces on the side of a mountain. And this

morning I got up at quarter to five to meet my guide today, Diana Mora. Diana grew up around exactly where we are now, she grew up in the Valle de los Salados, which is where we're going today in Norte de Santander. Diana is a student of veterinary medicine in Bucaramanga and her parents still live in the local area, and she kindly agreed to show me around. So, she's come up from Bucaramanga, we met this morning and I'm here with Diana.



Diana: Mi nombre es Diana Milena Mora. Soy de acá, del municipio de Veta.

So Diana was just telling me she was born and grew up in the Valle de los Salados, which is where we're going now. And she lived there until she was seven, when she moved to Vetas. And she lived there from the age of seven, her parents still live up in this area. And today she's going to take me to the Laguna Colorada, and Laguna Súrcura, which are two of the closer lakes, just because of the nature of the recordings of these podcasts we don't have too much time to go walking today. But as we are on our very short route, I'm going to be talking to Diana about the longer trekking opportunities. I know that you can trek for hours, days, perhaps weeks even, in this part of the world.

Just to give you an idea of where we are, it's about half past... quarter to six in the morning now. And the sun is just beginning to rise above the higher peaks. We still haven't got the sun shining on us yet, but it's a beautiful day, we're incredibly lucky today. High mountains are notoriously unpredictable in terms of their weather. Last night it was raining. A cloud cover was right down in the village of Vetas. I woke up this morning, and there's not a cloud in the sky, literally. It's a high mountain, very light, blue, almost colorless... it's not white, it's like colorless sky. But then on the other side, where it's a little bit darker, the sky's a lighter blue, much more definitive blue. And we'll be looking over the most incredible rugged peaks. At





the moment we're, according to my altimeter, we're at 3547 meters above sea level. And the sun's just rising above the higher peaks and shining across onto the peaks on the other side of the valley that we're in at the moment. It's absolutely spectacular. And we're looking over to the Laguna Pajarito, which has a myth associated with it, which I'll ask Diana to tell us about in a moment. We're in what's known as the Páramo de Santurbán, which is a high páramo ecosystem, which straddles the departments of Santander and Norte de Santander. And where we're climbing today, between up to about 3000 if the reading is fine, we're climbing to that to just over 3600 meters above sea level, perhaps even a bit higher. But let's get going. I'll talk to you more along the way. That's a beautiful sign to begin our journey. It says, "welcome," the "o" of welcome is a multi gender symbol, and it says "welcome to the Pajarito Las Calles path, our richness is in our water."

And the path we're on now, is one of the multitude of what they call 'caminos reales' or 'caminos de herradura', royal roads. Or... 'caminos de herradura' really means like a cobbled road, or paved with stone. And these paths... it's an incredible network of hundreds, thousands of kilometers in front if we look across the wider, extensive departments of Colombia. It's a country where the ancient roots that the original inhabitants of these lands, the original colonizers of these lands, tens of thousands of years ago, basically created these paths as they explored and migrated through these new lands. And then as Diana said, a little bit earlier, as trade routes between departments, this originally

was a trade, commerce and also... this originally was a commerce route between Santander and Norte de Santander, so this path will have been walked for centuries. And just as I was talking Diana turned around and made me turn around as well. We just joked around and... we've got the Laguna Pajarito behind us and it's just catching the lights of the morning sun, storm breaks over the mountains. And all of a sudden from a sort of black mirror-like surface, it's now turned into an orange and blue reflection of the blue of the sky and the orange being reflected back off the mountains on the other side of the valley as the sun creeps down there. And if you stand for long enough, you can actually see the movements of the sun. You can feel the movements of the earth, rather, as the line of shadow between... as the sun rises over the mountain, the shadow drops and you can actually see it move if you stand for long enough. I think it's a real sensation of the rotation of the earth for me.

👤 Diana: Cuenta la leyenda que un sacerdote vino y le echó una maldición, y le tiró...

So the legend of Laguna Pajarito, where we are, this is a glacial formation. This would be... We've got a waterfall coming from a spring a little bit higher up. We've got a sheer cliff face behind us, and a sort of U-shaped



classic glacial like shaped valley between the mountains. And what's left is this little lake the Pajarito. But the legend says that the Pajarito lake actually originally covered the whole of this valley floor, and would swallow people up if they strayed off the path and then a priest came along and cursed the lake, and threw a communion wafer into the lake. And the lake began to shrink, and is now the small size that it is now. And geologically there might be a different explanation, but the myth is a typical myth for this part of the world, with the sort of mystical Christian Catholic connotations which are so prevalent in this part of the world.

👤 Hipólito: Yo me dedico a estos páramos hace más de 25 años. Vivo en estos páramos, andando...

So Hipólito's just telling me he's been taking care of farms up here for twenty-five years, keeps cattle up here, but says he also makes sure that he looks after the páramo ecosystem. He checks the lakes. He makes sure that everything's in order. And we're gonna get walking 'cause we've got about another half an hour or so, until we get up to the Valle de los Salados and we're actually in Norte de Santander. And clouds are coming over the mountains, so we better get walking 'cause we don't want to get rained on. So I asked Diana as someone who grew

up here what her favorite things about this particular area are. And I'll start with what she finished which was the sky. She said, "when you're up here on a clear night, it is absolutely incredible." This afternoon there's no light pollution whatsoever. There is... once you're up at this altitude in the Valle de los Salados, there are no nearby municipalities that are producing any kind of light pollution. So the sky on a clear night is just incredible. The only light you've got is the light of the... it's the celestial light shining down on you. And for her that is absolutely incredible. So, stargazing opportunities... the other things she mentioned was lots of bird life. She loves the birds, she's seen herself the condors in these mountains. There are also eagles, native eagles flying around the mountains. And she also mentioned a lizard, they call it the páramo lizard, which I find fascinating. I had no idea that lizards lived at this altitude, and in these low temperatures. Mountain rabbits, she mentioned, as well, and a number of other animals. So what to do? As well as the hiking, bird-watching, stargazing... sounds like an absolutely incredible place to come and camp out for a few days.

And so the páramo ecosystem is an incredibly important ecosystem for the world, obviously, but especially for the local inhabitants because it's the source of their water, and the source of the water comes from the plant, which is called the Frailejón. It's called the Frailejón in English as well. It is from the Espeletia family. It's from the sunflower family and you can see it when you've got one up close, because it's the stalks, are reminiscent... and the leaves



rather are reminiscent of the sunflower stalk, this sort of soft solidity of the...it's the only way I can find at describing this, the sunflower stalk, but with the hairs on it, as well. And the way that the Frailejón works in a páramo ecosystem, is it absorbs water from the rain but it also absorbs water from the air. A lot of the time here it's not actually raining, but we're swathed in mist right now. The mist has come back down again. The view that we could see a second ago is clouded over again, so we're right in the middle of the mist. And the Frailejón, the hairs on the Frailejón capture a water vapor from the mists which then is absorbed into the plant and released out through the roots of the plant into the ground. So when it rains, or when it's misty, the plants are absorbing water, but in dry season the Frailejones are releasing water back into the ecosystem, which keeps the rivers flowing, basically, and keeps the lake's flow which is providing water sources to the local population.

So like I was saying a minute ago, this mountain climate is incredibly changeable. We just got to a strategic view point, but we were shrouded in mist. Cloud cover was... completely surrounded us, completely. And all of a sudden, the clouds opened up, and we've got a beautiful view of one of the many lakes, the Laguna Colorada, the colorful lake. Which from the angle that we are at is beautiful, it's heart-shaped, set in the base in the top of what appears to be again a glacial valley. It's absolutely gorgeous, this scenery's incredible. Clouds are coming back down now, so we're going to carry on walking. Let's get going. Vámonos. Divino este sitio...

This is absolutely incredible. We started walking over towards the path down to the Súrcura lake, and like I've been saying in the last couple of recordings, it's completely cloudy, really low cloud cover. We're walking through the mist and the day has just cleared up, completely. We've got a totally, totally open, wide open view out over the Valle de los Salados. We can see all the way over to the mountains, right on the other side, which Diana tells me are the mountains from Pamplona, about 80 kms away from where we are. The most incredible view all the way down. The valley, we can see the roof of the house that Diana was born in, and grew up in. And Hipólito still spends a lot of his time in, and he's up here looking after the cattle. And we've just walked up... oh, my word. We've come to where we were going. These are the two lakes... wow. The Súrcura lake is right in front of us.

—¿Y cómo se llama la de allá?

El Macho is just in front of us. Súrcura is just... I can't describe it. Surrounded by mountain vegetation in the low scrubs of the high mountain. And the Frailejones are all over the place. The color is this deep, deep black color. So, it's... you can't... it's almost as if it's not there. That's the only way I can describe it. It's like a mirror to the soul. And I'm sort of looking out over some kind of reproduction of the cosmos here on earth... It's just... it's just magical.

I'm really excited as well because, so we're walking up a path, she was telling me earlier, the one she was coming from when she was a little baby. And she can remember in her childhood. She would come down this path with her mom and dad on horseback, and mom would be carrying her. She said it was freezing cold and they'd get to Roberto's house





where we parked the car, which is the first house on this particular trail. And sometimes when they'd get there they'd be soaking wet and freezing cold. And so Roberto would take them in, they would warm up in the heat of Roberto's wood fired stove, he would heat them up some 'agua de panela', which is the local drink. Panela is raw cane sugar. So they'd warm up in Roberto's house before continuing their journey. And I do love stories like that and going with someone like Diana along a path that she has trodden since she was a little girl. You know, I'm here constantly looking at these mountains. Jaw-dropping scenery. Just saying, wow, wow, wow. And Diana's... This is her environment. But the interesting thing is, you can see on her face, the look of wonder as well. I think it's... That's a look of wonder of somebody appreciating the incredible natural beauty of her backyard, but it's also a look of wonder because it never ceases to be beautiful and stunning to Diana as well. And so it's a very, very special day and a very special way to end this incredible journey that Pro Colombia has sent me on, and Punto Aparte, visiting all of Colombia's 32 departments in two months. I wonder how many other people have visited the 32 departments in their entirety, let alone in the period of time that I've visited them. I already feel that it's been a moment in which I've been able to sort of take the temperature of a country, there've been no significant political, sporting, or even global events during the time I've been recording. There's nothing that has changed people's psyche. That's really been a measurement of a moment in time in a country. Incredibly privileged and incredibly fortunate to have been able to do this. And it's such a beautiful place that we've chosen to do this last recording.



PROCOLOMBIA

EXPORTACIONES TURISMO INVERSIÓN MARCA PAÍS