

# STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Huila

**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.

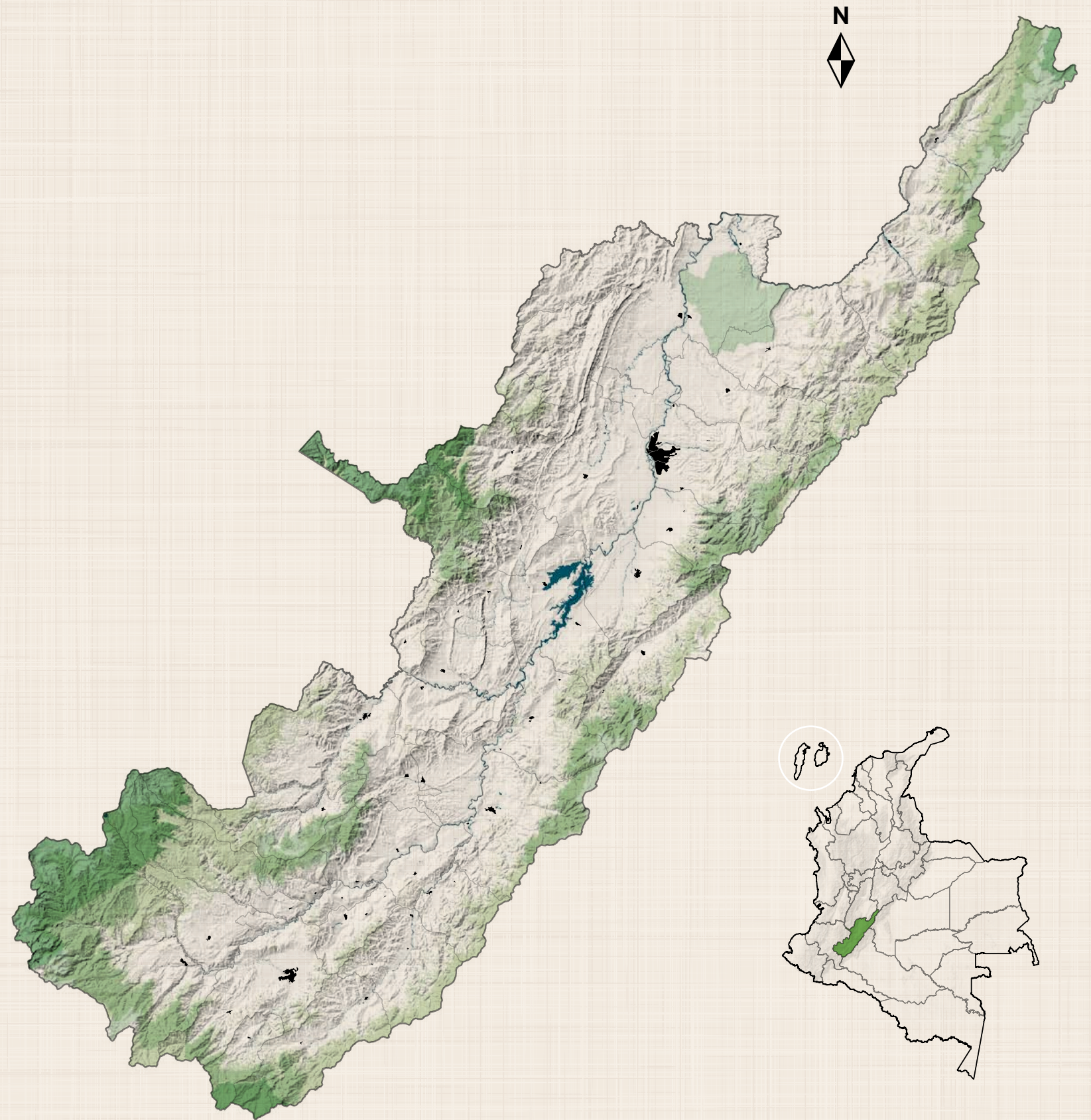
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

# Huila

So, I just arrived in the always lovely little town of San Agustín, pretty much at the end of the road heading south from Bogotá through the Departments of Tolima and into Huila, which is the department that we're visiting in today's episode of the podcast. Huila is a very rural Department, lots of agriculture. There are all sorts of crops growing, staples: rice, wheat, barley; lots of coffee in the southern part of the Department, where I am now. As you start coming south, vegetation changes to lots and lots of coffee plantations. There's cattle ranching of all sorts in Huila, and it's a very green Department; it rains a lot here but there's also a lot of sun, temperatures are fairly stable all year-round and so you just throw seed in the ground and it grows. It's a very fertile land.

And we're also in what's known as the "Macizo Colombiano," the "Colombian Massif," which is where the three mountain ranges, that run all the way down from the northern coast of Colombia, meet and join to form the start of the Andes mountain range that continues all the way down to southern Chile from where I am now. That spectacular mountain scenery, it's just everywhere you look: in front, behind, left and right. It's just mountain after mountain, layers and layers and layers of mountains rolling off into the distance. And San Agustín is famous for its carved rock statues. I'll talk more about the history of the statues and when they were first uncovered, or re-uncovered, tomorrow with my guide Olga, who's going to be taking me to the park. She's a local guide,



has an interesting story to tell us. There are statues spread all across this particular region of the Department, especially concentrated in the San Agustín Archeological Park, which I've visited a number of times over the years and will be going to again tomorrow. And I'm really excited. I don't think I've ever been there with a guide, used to go with a cheat sheet that I downloaded from the internet, and before that from a travel guide, I guess, and information that I was given when I walked into the park. But it's going to be great to go to the guide tomorrow and actually hear a little bit more about the story of the statues and also hear a bit about what tourism means for the local people here in San Agustín, which has traditionally been a very agriculturally-based economy, and tourism has definitely been a factor in the local economy now for the last 20, 25 years. And before that, lots of backpackers, not much national, domestic tourism; very little higher tier international tourism. Lots of backpacking throughout the 90s, 80s, back into the 70s. But it's still a very agricultural-based economy, and so it's gonna be interesting to hear from somebody who grew up here about how tourism has changed the expectations and possibilities for young people.

**Olga:** ¡Hola, buenos días!

—Buenos días, ¿tú eres Olga?

**Olga:** Sí, ¿tú eres Nick?

—Hola Olga, yo soy Nick.





**Olga:** Hola, mucho gusto, Nick, ¿cómo estás?

—Tu cliente de hoy.

**Olga:** ¡Ah, qué bueno! Qué bueno, sí.

So, Olga and I just arrived to the entrance to the park, a little nice drive up a paved road from San Agustín, a couple of kilometers. You rise up a little bit above the altitude of San Agustín. And it's the perfect day for wandering around the park: it's cloudy, so we don't have to worry about the sun. And it's quite nice and cool, so we should have a nice walk around the park. It seems like there are quite not very many tourists here today, which is also nice. We'll have the place to ourselves.

**Olga:** En el parque, o sea la caminata, la travesía que se hace es de aproximadamente como 5 kilómetros ida y vuelta.

So Olga is just telling me we're gonna be able to see most of the park today. There are a couple of bits that are currently being remodeled, but she said the most important parts we'll be able to see. And she'll also tell me as we walk around the park as much as we know, or what she knows about the culture that left these statues behind. And she's going to tell me as much as she knows about the cultures that left them behind, because there's a lot of mystery around the statues and around the culture that left them behind. Nobody really knows., There's a lot of conjecture and Olga's gonna talk about all of that as we follow our path.

—Entonces, ¡vámonos!

**Olga:** Sí, bueno, vamos a hacer la caminata...

**Olga:** Sí señor, sigue estando en el sitio original; lo que se han hecho son reconstrucciones.

I've also been wondering around for a while., I'll ask Olga about something I'm curious about, which I'm not 100% sure that I know, and it's whether the sites of the statues now are where they were originally erected. And Olga says that yes, they are located where they were found, basically where we believe that they would have been originally located; there's been some work done because as some of them have been obviously stood up turned around, some of them were twisted, they've fallen over; they've been put back where we believe they would have been originally. And all the work's been done by trained archaeologists, people that Olga says that know what they're doing with this kind of restoration.

**Olga:** Aquí vamos a encontrar una serie de estructuras, montículos artificiales, una serie de tumbas... ¿Por qué tumbas? Porque este es un sitio funerario.

So we're just about to come out and into the... We're walking out of the forest and I can see a large grassy area in front of me. And Olga says we're gonna see the first statues and also the first tombs. She said the San Agustín culture, we believe, placed great importance on the afterlife or at least on commemorating their leaders,



because most of these statues, we believe, are based around funeral rites. And there are a lot of tombs here as well, so this comes together to suggest the objective of these statues.

**Olga:** Las que están con techos o cobertizos, el revestimiento es en cemento, algunas en bahareque, para evitar que se erosionen con la lluvia y pues que conserven su forma auténtica, su forma original...

Ok, so, what we're looking at —it appears to be carved out of rock, but it's not, actually. Olga is just saying that what we're seeing is actually cement which has been built to prevent the ground collapsing back in on the tomb. These were actually built as graves. So, yeah, what we're looking at here it's basically... it's a fairly rectangular shaped stone structure underground, which would have been underground, and that would have been covering either one or a number of bodies; that depends on the tomb. Some of them were collective, others were individual.

**Olga:** En la estatuaria Agustiniana predomina lo que es mucho la planimetría de la escultura...

And she said, "Really, what we think is that the statues were carved according to the shape of the stone from which they were carved." She said most of the statues that we're gonna find here are interesting in that the stone was only carved on one face., Sso you've one face which is representing the person, the animal, or — she'll tell us more about the different types of form and statue that we find here—, but it most of them are only carved on one face. There are some of them which are carved on three and others which are complete carved statues or carved rocks.

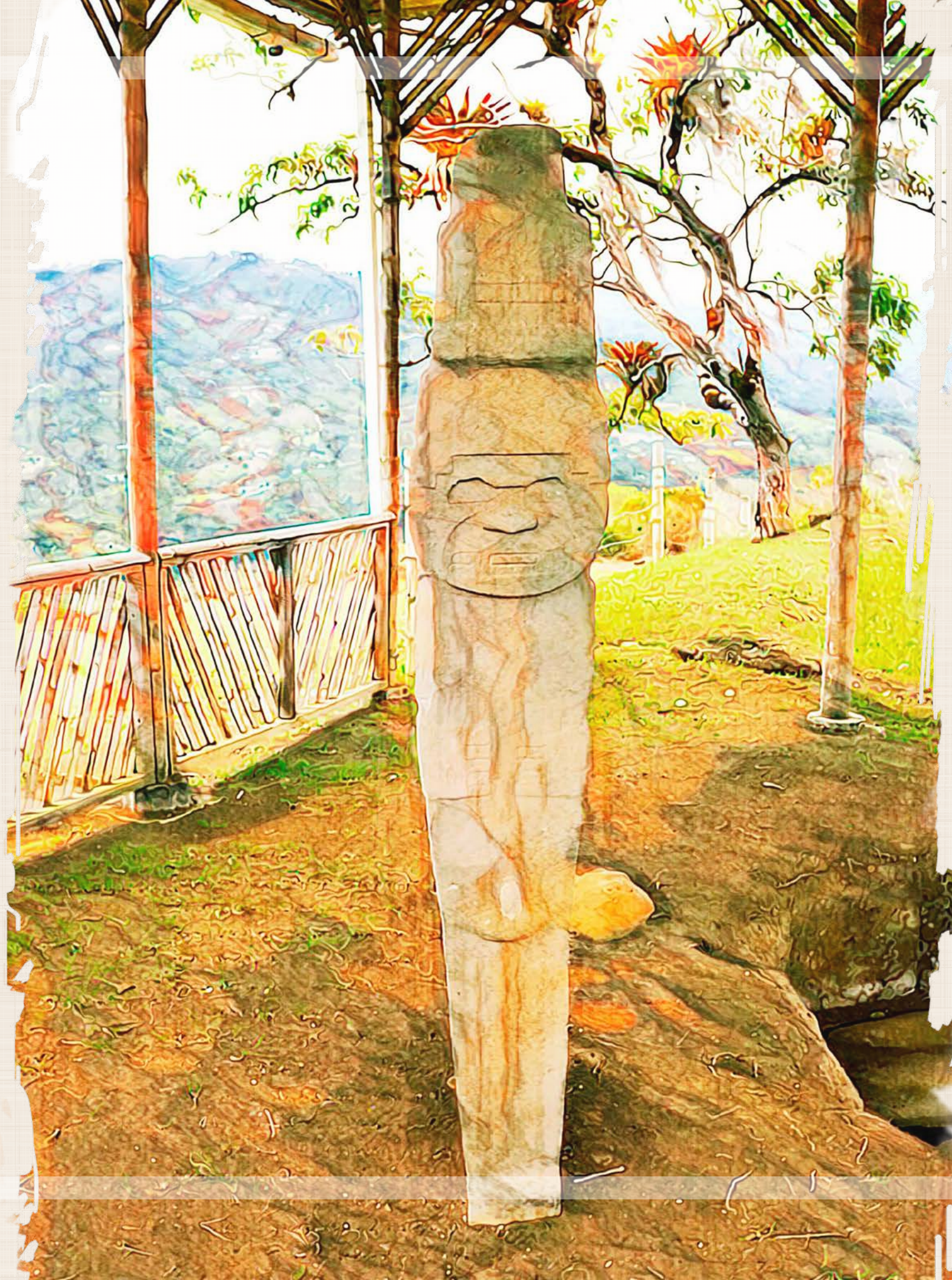


**Olga:** El principal material que ellos trabajaron fueron la piedra, trabajaron la madera, trabajaron la cerámica...

Ok, so they were definitely a stone-based culture. Olga's saying that what we found, the tools and other implements, were stone-based. Lots of obsidian, so they definitely would have been using volcanic-based rock; and, yes, so and I asked her, you know, "So, have we found any metal? Was there any metal that they would've been using at that time?" And she said "very little." "So, yeah, we believe as well that this wasn't really a gold based culture. We've found lots of stone work—the statues, obviously-, lots of pottery, but very, very little gold." And she said, what little was found is in the Gold Museum in Bogota; but she said about three times in her answer "very little, very little."

**Olga:** Hay un proceso que se llama 'quimiotactismo', consiste en que los componentes orgánicos que poseen los restos se absorben por las raíces de los árboles...

So that's very interesting: Olga is telling me that the composition of the local soil basically means that most remains had completely decomposed. We found very, very few remains; and she said she's often asked by tourists, you know, "where are the bones?" "We didn't find very many here at all, hardly any," she said, "because of the composition of the soil. So what we're looking at is a series of hypotheses based on what we know from other cultures and based on what was found in the grave, rather than—the artifacts found in the grave— rather than the human remains."



**Olga:** Bueno, esta civilización que habitó en esta zona del Alto Magdalena fueron unos grandes artistas...

So Olga is telling me—I asked her to tell me a little bit more about the people, what we know about the people who lived here and the people who carved these statues. And she said: "Basically, very little. We know that they were hard-working; we know that they had a great dedication to their art. We know that from the evidence that we've found and the evidence they left behind at the statues. And that's it. That's all we know. We don't know why they left, we don't know if there was disease, whether their lands were invaded, whether they just decided to move on? It's one of the great mysteries." And I think, for me, that's one of the joys of visiting the site. You've really just got to appreciate it for what it is. It's the remains of an ancient civilization that have lasted throughout the centuries and that they just decided to go. And they left behind some fascinating sculptures that are artistically pleasing to look at, they are aesthetically pleasing; in a beautiful place, which is visually stunning, surrounded by mountains, the most amazing vistas. That's a really interesting place to visit because you come here with lots of questions, and I think you probably leave with even more questions. Which is something I personally, particularly enjoy, not always having the answer. Sometimes not even having any answer at all, but just having to say "I went, I spent time there, I processed it, and I took from it something important to me and very unique to me. It made me think in a different way, but I have no idea whatsoever what the purpose was of the person who built it." And maybe that was their purpose. That's nuts. Perhaps another thing, maybe they deliberately did it as a sign of personal reflection. By not knowing why or who, you're forced to look inside.





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