

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Guaviare

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.

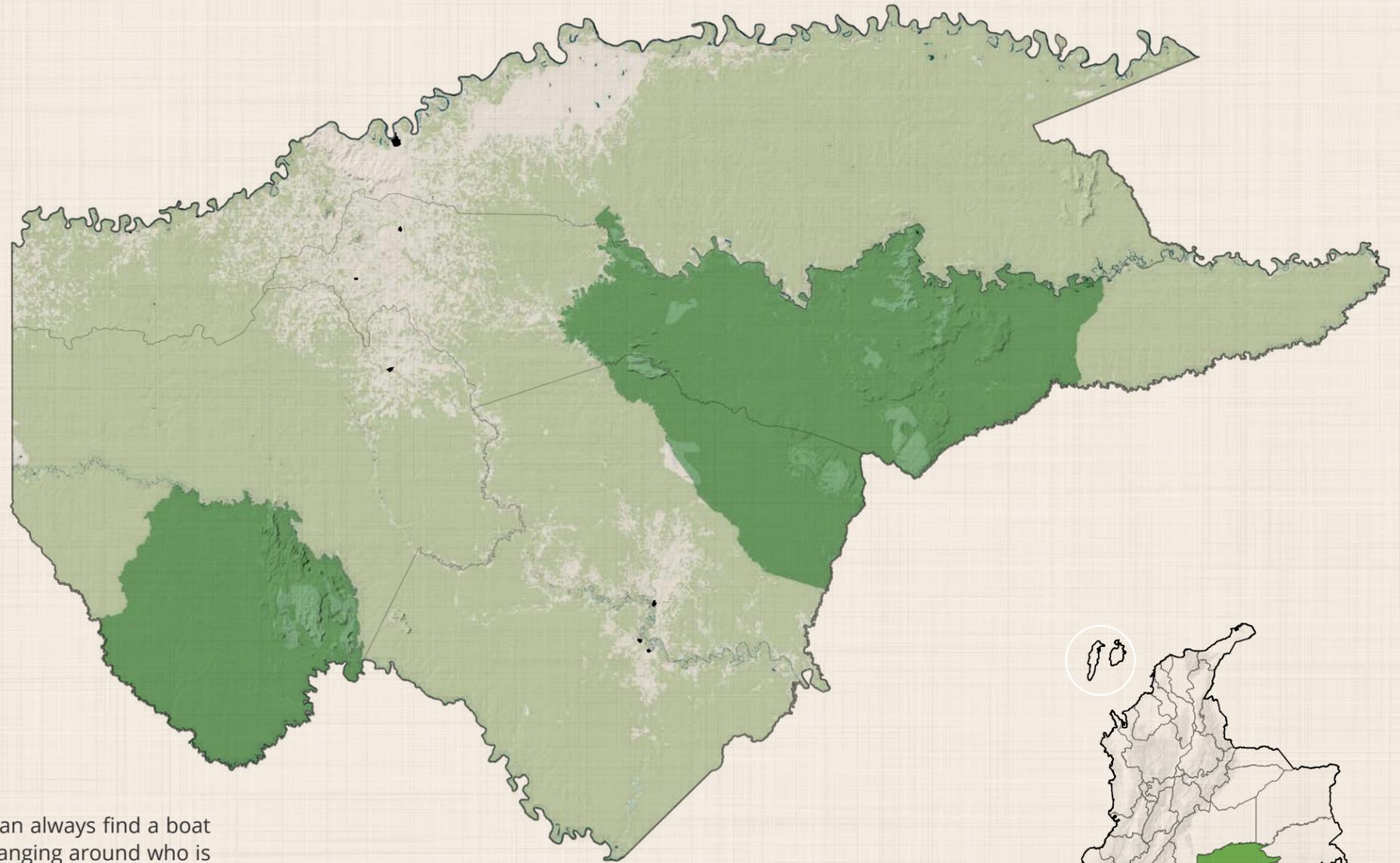
I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.

Guaviare



So today I'll be visiting the Department of Guaviare. I'm starting my journey in San José del Guaviare, which is about an hour or so by plane from Bogotá. You usually fly in quite a small two-engine propeller plane. Which is nice because it flies a little bit lower than jets and you get to see a little bit more of the scenery. And arriving in San José, the airport's right in the middle of town, which is great. So you can, if you want, you can walk to your hotel or grab a taxi. They've got loads of the Thai-style Tuk-Tuk or rickshaws – if you've ever been in India or Thailand – style mototaxis all over the place. San José is a small river port on the banks of the Guaviare river. Not really very much going on in town. That's... Probably the most interesting thing to do in San José is just go and sit by the docks, grab yourself a juice or a fizzy drink or beer, if that's your thing. At sunset it's really nice, picturesque, and watching all the boats get loaded and wonder where they're going. And you can actually wander down to the boats. I wouldn't recommend asking anyone who is carrying anything. They get a bit cross if you stop them

to ask things, but you can always find a boat captain or somebody hanging around who is not doing the heavy lifting, who's usually more than happy to talk to you about where they're going and the journey that takes them there. And the reason I've chosen to come to San José: Guaviare is a gorgeous department, it's a semi-jungle department. So, you can reach



it by road, in fact, from Villavicencio. All the way from Bogotá, it's about a ten hour drive. It's quite picturesque, through rolling plains. Anyway, I flew in, but the reason I chose to come to San José, in Guaviare, is because of all the things that there are to do in Guaviare, and one thing that I personally have never done is going to see the rock paintings in Cerro Azul. It's a... Basically, it's a rock outcrop sticking up above the jungle and it's completely covered in paintings. There are something like 150 linear meters of paintings that range between just a few centimeters and about 12 meters high in parts. The paintings date back between seven hundred and twelve and a half thousand years, and it's a fascinating place to imagine the different peoples that have passed through and left their mark on the wall. It's been like an ancient graffiti site in the middle of the jungle. So, I'm really looking forward to it and I will be talking about that. I'm really looking forward to it. So let's get on it and listen to today's episode.

—¿César? Buenos días, ¿qué tal? ¿Cómo está?

César: ¡Mucho gusto!

—Mucho gusto.

So, after breakfast in my hotel on my first morning in San José I got a text from César, the owner of the agency that organized my trip to Cerro Azul telling me he was outside. I went outside, met César; met Marcel, who was gonna be my guide; Yurani, my driver for the day; and we had a chat about what we were gonna be doing and how a typical trip would work. Usually guests are picked up in their hotels. The complete package includes lunch and also dinner once they get back to the hotel. Going to Cerro Azul really is an all-day activity, as I'm about to find out. And normally groups run about eight people in size. I am super





lucky because I'm recording this podcast and being able to do this alone, I have the guide all to myself; we're able to stop where I want, take photos where I want. Usually you'll be with others. The agency provides everything you need, including water. You just need to bring your own water bottle so that you can refill it from the big bottle that they keep in the Jeep. And it takes about an hour and 20 minutes, César tells me, to get to Cerro Azul from San José; and then once we get to Cerro Azul we'll be going on a thru-hike. We'll be taking a circular route. It will take us somewhere between three and four hours.

So I'm finally on my way to the mythical Cerro Azul archaeological sites. Cerro Azul is the 'Blue Hill' or I guess the 'Blue Mountain', but it's really a hill. And Cerro Azul is the site of a number of archaeological digs over the years, dating back to the mid-1980s, which has been discovering more and more archaeological relics of cultures going back further and further, which currently are dated back to around and about two and a half thousand years ago. There are rock paintings and all sorts of other artifacts that have been discovered. I'm looking at a sign that says it's 28 km to Cerro Azul, but I've just been told by my driver that it's gonna take us something like an hour and a half to get there. So, I think the road is going to be pretty tough. I'll let you know a little bit later on. Right now I'm standing, surrounded by the most amazing, green vegetation. And it's definitely not jungle vegetation. It's scrubland-type vegetation, and I'm standing on a really deep red, kind of clay red road, which just stretches off into the distance. You can see as far as the horizon. It's as flat as can be. So, in 28 km, an hour and a half, I'm gonna get to this amazing Cerro Azul site.

So we've been driving for about half an hour, 40 minutes now, down this beautiful, deep-red clay road through the jungle. Verdant,



green vegetation all around us all the way, and occasionally the jungle would open up and you catch a glimpse of a log cabin in the distance or a distant hill. You come over the crest of a hill and all of a sudden you just see this, as far as the eye can see, right to the horizon, it's just this green jungle. The sounds of the birds are amazing as well, as we've been driving down the road. And, I thought I'd stop just for a moment to record, because we've reached a fork in the road and apparently this is a key point in local tourism. If we go left, we will go to Cerro Azul — there's a sign here and it says that you will be surprised by the rock art and you'll be able to imagine some of the ways that our ancestors lived in this Amazon region going back more than 10,000 years. And, if you go right, you go to the rapids, on the Guayabero river, which is a really important waterway in this part of the world.

👤 Marcel: Acá empieza el cuento. Primero, ¡bienvenido!

It sounds like it's going to be amazing. So we're gonna walk towards this huge rock coming up out of the jungle, right in front of me. It's part of the Guayana Shield, one of what are called the tepuyes, which are rock formations which come up out of the Guayana Shield, which I mentioned in the introduction to the podcast. And this is one of the places in the world with the largest concentration of rock paintings. He's saying there are about 1,200 square meters of rock paintings and at one point we're gonna reach a rock where there's a 150 meters-long series of paintings. This sounds fascinating. I'm really looking forward to it and I will narrate some more a little bit later.

To get to the start of the Cerro Azul hike from Norvey's house we walk down quite a flat pass. At the start, its fields are cultivated with different crops and gradually the fields start giving way to forest, which becomes denser

and denser around us, full of all sorts of weird and wonderful plants and animal sounds, and Norvey tells me a little bit about what's going on either side as we walk towards Cerro Azul. It takes about half an hour or so to get from Norvey's house to get to the trailhead and it's a lovely day; it's definitely warm, but not too hot.

—Su familia lleva mucho tiempo aquí.
¿Siempre supieron de las pinturas?

So, Norvey and his family have been living here for quite some time, but I was curious to know if when they decided to buy this land, they knew about the paintings; and, if they did, whether it formed part of the negotiations. I mean, yes, buying a piece of land where you have exclusive access to ancient cave paintings that hundreds, perhaps thousands of people want to come and see every year. And, interestingly Norvey tells me that it wasn't a factor at all. They didn't even take it into account. No one really cared about the paintings when he bought the land a couple of decades ago. There were just some paintings on the rocks and he said it really didn't factor into the decision at all and in no way affected the price he paid.

Marcel: Es un juego que yo les propongo a los visitantes y es que en los próximos 30-40 metros que vamos a realizar, no mires hacia arriba.

I've been given a challenge by Marcel. So, he tells me that we're about to get to one of the most impressive sections of paintings, so I'm not allowed to look now to the left. I have to walk the next 30 to 40 meters just looking down at the path or looking to the right and he's going to tell me when I'm allowed to look. So I'm gonna to keep recording and I can tell you my excitement building because I know he wouldn't have told me this if I wasn't about to see something pretty impressive. So, I'm just looking at the back of Marcel's heels



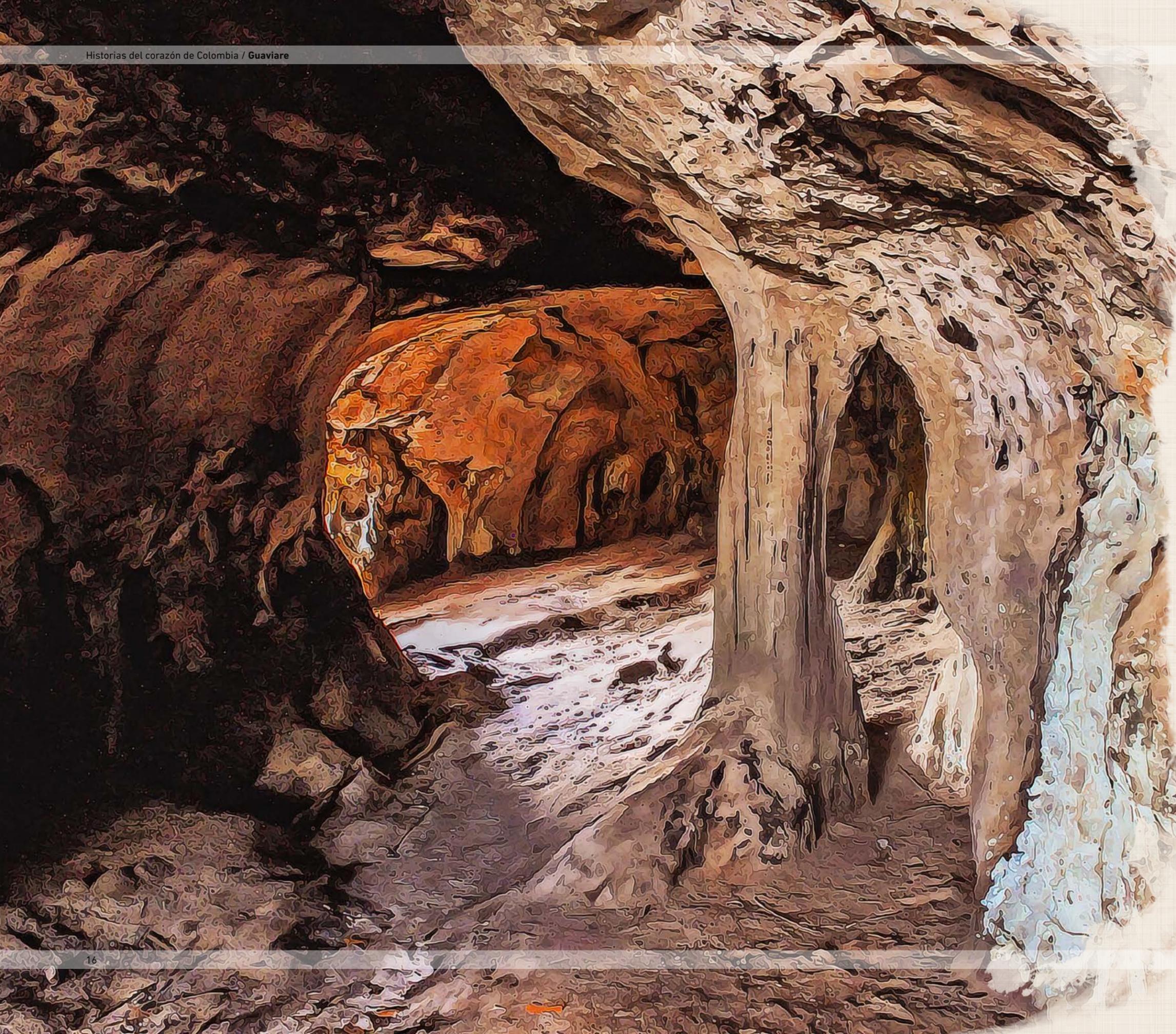
as we walk down this jungle track; water dripping above me and I desperately want to look to see where the water's dripping from, whether it started to rain or whether it's from somewhere else. He said that I'm allowed to turn around now.

Wow. I really did not expect that. I thought they were gonna be some isolated paintings. This is a huge mural.

📍 Norway: Entonces aquí lo que vemos, ya estamos en el primer panel, lo llamamos el panel principal, o el mural bonito. Hablábamos, Marcel, el tema de la conservación una parte, y es que mire el techo donde está.

This was obviously designed, Norway's telling me, as a mural, which was designed to last across history, because it's been very cleverly placed. There's a rock overhang and I think because of the prevailing winds as well, there's quite a lot of water dripping off, that you can probably hear in the background, dripping off the rock overhang, but it never touches the wall and that's why what I'm looking at right now is is a very, very well-preserved mural from thousands of years ago because it hasn't had water pouring down it. Another reason is that this rock is quite porous so the paint, when it was applied, was able to penetrate the rock quite deeply, which means it has been able to last the test of time. In terms of my questions to him about whether we know the purpose of this mural, whether it's a storytelling mural, or is it really... We're not really sure, because it is from so long ago and the culture that painted these murals no longer exists. Current belief is that it really... They were just trying to leave a record of their daily lives.





So we're about to go into a 250 meters-long... I guess tunnel, really. It's a kind of cave complex. There are apparently two definite ways out. We're gonna take the easy way, one we just walk straight through, apparently it's going to get a little bit narrow at times; there are a lot of bats inside, so I'm really looking forward to hearing how this sounds when we are walking through.

I asked him if paintings have been found inside these caves and he says that no, they haven't been found, but actually where we're standing right now used to be the roof, it's fallen at some point over the years, so we don't know if they could have been paintings on the roof which are now under our feet. But what they do believe is this is where people would have stayed whilst they were visiting for whichever reason they came.

So now having thought that I had seen the paintings that Cerro Azul had to offer, as we came around the corner Norveysaid "now we're getting to the 150 meter-long wall." And this is a 150 meter-long wall just full of paintings. No one's sure if it was done by the same peoples or different cultures that would've come through. There are what appears to be layered paintings, so they don't know if those would have been the same culture painting over previous paintings. We don't know if there was an attempt at some form of perspective in the art or if it was subsequent cultures that would paint over previous cultures' work, a little bit like a modern graffiti artist would tag over each other's work.

I asked just the right question at just the right time. I asked if we know how the higher paintings were done, how people reached the higher levels because there are paintings up to probably 10-15 meters high. Norveys just gonna explain.

Okay, and here we have it. There's a painting on this piece of wood, Norway has just pointed out to me, of a ladder. Quite literally. It's two sticks, tree trunks, whatever they would have been, with branches across them; we can't tell from the painting whether they're tied or not. And there is an absolutely, definitely humanoid figure climbing up the ladder. So, yeah, ladders would've been made and presumably leaned against the walls to reach the higher levels.

Visiting San José del Guaviare, and especially Cerro Azul with these amazing cave paintings, rock paintings, was really a very special experience for me. It was amazing being in contact with people who've really, genuinely been able to transform their lives through tourism and through the beautiful natural environment that surrounds them. It's very inspiring. And I love hearing people talk with so much passion about the local environment and hear from them how tourism has been as much a journey of discovery for them, as for the tourists who visit them. An enriching journey to both parties. And of course, it was incredibly interesting. The actual objective of the trip, visiting the rock paintings, was incredibly interesting. It really made me feel like I was in touch with the roots of humanity in this part of the world. I mean, these paintings have been painted by people who we know very little about. The archaeological explorations in the area have shown us that people have been visiting this area for thousands and thousands of years. And it's really interesting to see how the paintings that they've made have developed and listen to some of the theories about what they may have or may not have been wanting to say with the paintings. But just seeing this record they left of their visit to a place that was evidently very, very special for them. It was a fascinating and magical experience.





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