

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Boyacá

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.

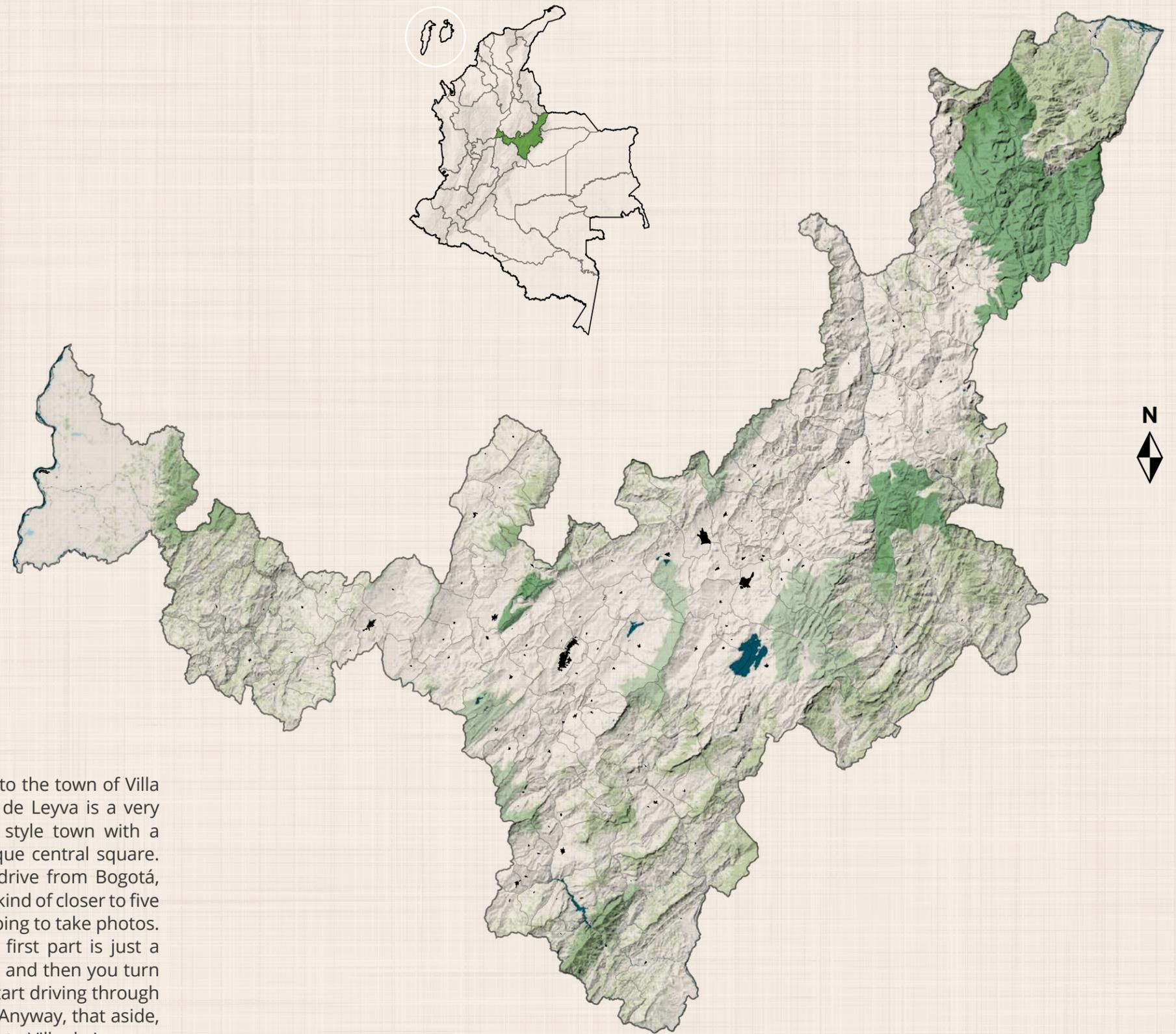
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Boyacá

In today's episode of the podcast, I visit the Department of Boyacá. Boyacá is just north of Cundinamarca, where the Capital city Bogotá is, and it's a largely agricultural-based economy, so a huge proportion of Colombia's potato production occurs in Boyacá, they grow onions and also some other crops. It's a Department of enormous variety. It has from low-land areas, just a few hundred meters above sea level, boiling hot tropical sun, and high mountains in the, you know, three-and-a-bit, four thousand meters kind of range, where temperatures are obviously a heck of a lot lower.

And so, I decided to drive to the town of Villa de Leyva, in Boyacá. Villa de Leyva is a very picturesque, old, colonial style town with a very unique and picturesque central square. Takes about a four-hour drive from Bogotá, although I think it took me kind of closer to five hours because I kept stopping to take photos. The road's gorgeous. The first part is just a kind of multilane highway, and then you turn off the highway and you start driving through the mountains of Boyacá. Anyway, that aside, it's a lovely, lovely road out to Villa de Leyva.



And I chose to come to Villa de Leyva because it's a very interesting, beautiful, picturesque town in itself, just lovely to wander around. And because of so many years of tourism it has a really well developed tourist infrastructure. So, whether you're looking for a budget backpackers hostel or a five-star spa hotel, you'll find it all in Villa de Leyva. The restaurants, also. It's about the gastronomic delights. You can spend hours, days, just wandering the streets, the beautiful cobbled streets lined with very well preserved Colonial houses. And I'm also curious: I want to visit what's called the Muisca Solar Observatory or 'El Infierno'; I'll talk about it a little bit later on in the podcast. And, I was curious to find during this episode that in fact the observatory is not or was not built by the Muisca at all; the Muisca appropriated it from an older culture about whom we know nothing. But the observatory itself dates back a number of thousands of years, and dates back to before the first historical register of a Muisca population in the region. So, that's something which I learned in the recording of this podcast which I found very, very interesting at a personal level and I'll be sharing that with you later on as you join me on my journey through the Department of Boyacá.



So, I sort of wander around the Villa de Leyva Plaza. It's absolutely beautiful, surrounded by low, sort of two-story high colonial buildings with clay tile roofs, wooden balconies sticking out to give you a bit of shelter from the rain if it rains or the sun when it's sunny; this is a very arid and usually quite sunny part of the country. Today is a little bit cloudy, actually, but it looks like the sun's going to come out later and, yeah, it's absolutely beautiful. So, very recommended to come here early in the morning rather than later when there are fewer people in the Plaza. You really get a sense of its magnitude. Apparently, this is one of the largest Colonial era plazas in... Definitely in Colombia, possibly even in the Americas.

To me one of the most beautiful things about these old Colonial towns is the amount of parks there are. So I'm just wandering around Villa de Leyva, we're actually walking back from where I had a coffee to where I park my car, and came across the Parque Antonio Nariño. It's a beautiful grassy park full of palm trees, birds tweeting in the early morning. It's just nice: as you are wandering around there's always somewhere that you can find a bit of shade, sit on a bench and just watch the world go by surrounded by gorgeous architecture, tropical plants, birds in the trees. The reason I've chosen to come to Villa de Leyva is to visit the Muisca astronomical observatory, which I'll head off to in a moment. An observatory which basically was a celebration of sexuality and fertility, and was then labeled by the Spanish conquistadores as "El Infierno," "Hell," because they got there and found these phallic structures in it. Definitely, definitely challenged their puritanical thinking.



So I'm just driving up to the entrance to the observatory and I see there's only one person outside the entrance and she's a woman, so I guess that must be Ángela, my guide.

—¿Ángela?

Ángela: Sí, hola.

—Hola, mucho gusto.

So Ángela just took me into the observatory and she's just about to introduce me to my guide in the observatory, Elsa. I just wanted to give you my first impressions and it's just... It's bizarre. It's quite a large site just completely covered with these enormous phallic structures, I mean, there's absolutely no doubt whatsoever that they are phalluses.

I'm really looking forward to listening to Elsa as she explains what on Earth is going on here.

So I'm here with Elsa Morales. Elsa takes care of this Muisca solar observatory and she's going to walk me around the observatory and tell me a little bit about its historical significance and what it means to local people today.

So, basically, Elsa is saying that this is the Muisca version of Stonehenge. It's a monument which tracks the movements of the sun; we're standing in front of two very straight lines of stone structures, and each line – they're about probably about 10 meters apart – and they mark the extremes of the sun as it moves across the sky during the year, the two solstices: the winter solstice and the summer solstice. And they were built like this so that the



original inhabitants could track the moment of the year by looking at where the sun was aligned between each of the two lines. And she said that originally the structures would've been about 1.80m tall. Now they're ranging from about 20cm tall to perhaps a meter.

So the Spanish got here, they saw all of these phallic structures standing up as monuments to something they didn't really understand and in their puritanical minds they saw this as some kind of devil worshipping cult. And in fact the site is actually called The Infierno Observatory, the Observatory of Hell. And then they set about destroying the stones, which is why what we have today are archeological remains, in the most part, rather than original stones. I'm fascinated by the fact that such an ancient culture was able to so accurately track the heavens and represent that with monuments on the earth, but I'm equally fascinated by the fact that they chose to use phallic symbols to do this, and I'm going to ask Elsa to explain to me a little bit about what we believe the reason was for choosing phalluses, rather than just placing rocks, to represent the heavens.

So, this is great. When people first come here their first impression is, you know, there are these huge erect penises everywhere and they really are enormous erect penises, all over the site. And she says, you know, people say "what is this? Is this some form of Muisca porn?" And she's like "of course it's not Muisca porn," you know. What it's all about is that



these phallic structures would be inverted at certain times of the year, so that right now I'm looking at one that the head of the penis is pointing directly upwards towards the sky, but they would be inverted so that the head of the penis, the male form, the male sexual form would be inverted and inserted head down into the Earth, which was the female form. And it was a ritual, a ceremonial act which would represent the fertilization of the soil and lead to abundant crops.

So, right now we're looking at the upright phallic structure and this actually would represent, it would be inverted in this way when it was time for the harvest. So, the phallus would be inverted to point towards the sky, it would draw energy from the heavens during the harvest and then it would be inverted once again head down at the time of sowing to fertilize the soil.

And now that I've left the observatory I have to say that I find it just as fascinating to learn that it's not actually a Muisca solar observatory. It was made, constructed by a culture much older than the Muiscas. We don't know who they were but we do know that the stones date back way before the history of Muisca occupation of these lands. So the Muisca appropriated this from somebody else, and that I find absolutely fascinating. I love mysteries like that. And I hope one day somebody finds the Rosetta Stone of the solar observatory to be able to decipher who it was who built these incredible monuments, and why. Maybe we never will.

So I'm back with Angela now and I'm going to get her to talk to me a little bit more about Boyacá and about her life as a guide, and also as somebody who comes from a traditional farming family in Boyacá.

So Ángela's saying that what she's been talking up to now is really what you can do around Villa de Leyva, which is obviously very close to her heart; she's a local. But she said, you know, "don't forget that the rest of Boyacá is an incredible Department." So, you go from the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy, which is a snow capped peak at over five thousand meters above sea level; right down to the Magdalena river which at this point of its course is at somewhere between three hundred and five hundred meters above sea level. And then, in between, you've got lots of colonial towns, so she mentions Monguí, which is a very famous colonial town near Tota lake; Tunja, which is the Departamental capital, which is a beautiful old colonial city.

Ángela tells me that her grandmother and her mother are both smallholders and work the land, and that she comes from a family that's been working these lands for generations. And I'm curious to find out whether she's followed these traditions.

So Ángela, living where she lives and in the way that she lives, she said it's like living in paradise. You don't have the noise of cars outside, you have beautiful sunsets, you wake up in this nice quiet beautiful place. Her family is a smallholding family; they call them *campesinos* in Colombia. A *campesino* is basically a smallholder. It's a multiple-production smallholding. At the moment Ángela and her family have a vegetable garden,

they produce a lot of their own vegetables. She milks the cows every morning still. They have pigs, rabbits and Ángela is a knitter, which in English is just an isolated term, doesn't really mean anything. But here, what they call a *tejedora*, a knitter, is a very traditional way of women getting together and discussing and resolving issues which affect them. So, it's a really important and very old tradition.

I had a great day in Boyacá, exploring Villa de Leyva, the solar observatory, listening to Ángela tell me her stories about life in the country in Boyacá. It's evident from listening to Ángela that it's still of huge importance for the economy and for the people as well, for their sense of identity in working the land, in the agricultural traditions which are still maintained today in Boyacá. And it

was absolutely fascinating to visit the solar observatory and find out about its symbolism and the way that the phallic symbols represent the fertilization of the earth. Perhaps those who built this monument did such a good job fertilizing the soil that that's why today, thousands of years afterwards, Boyacá is still one of the most productive agricultural regions in the whole of Colombia.





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