

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Tolima

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.

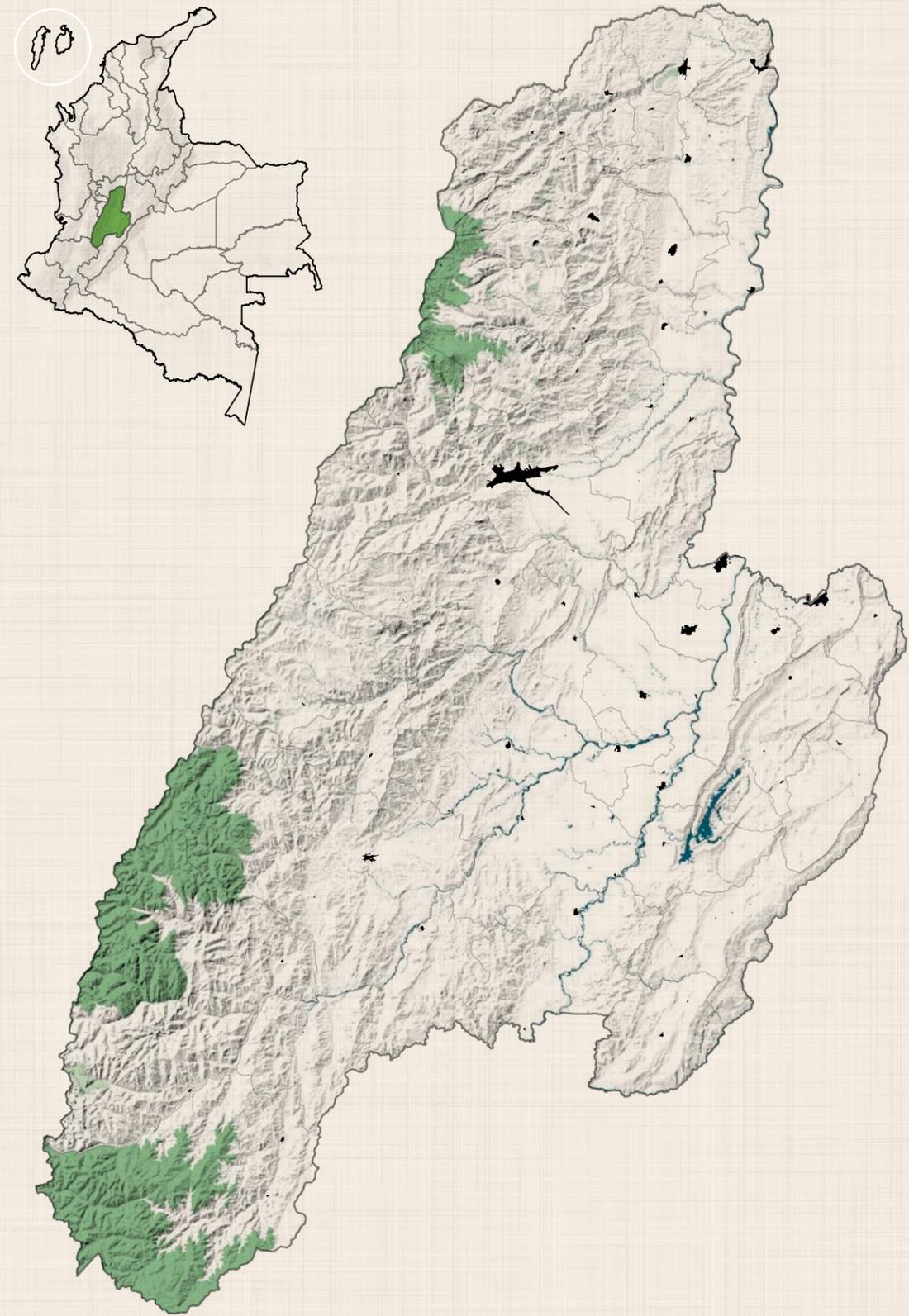
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

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

Tolima

Hi, I'm your host, Nick Perkins, and in this episode of the podcast I visit the lovely town of Honda in the Department of Tolima in central Colombia. Tolima is a fertile, mostly lowland Department that sits between Colombia's eastern and central mountain ranges. I say mostly lowland because to the west of the magnificent river Magdalena valley, that runs right through the middle of Tolima, are all the steep slopes and soaring peaks of the *Nevedos Del Ruiz*, Tolima and Santa Isabel, right up in the Department of Caldas, but Tolima extends quite a good way up the slopes of those mountains. But I'll leave that for another episode. I chose to visit Honda to record this podcast because it's a beautiful colonial town on the banks of the river Magdalena. It was once a bustling transit point for commerce and travelers on their way to Bogotá, from both southern and northern Colombia, and further afield. Basically anybody who came to Bogotá, from

anywhere in the world, anywhere in Colombia, had to go through Honda at one point, before transiting up to Bogotá. Nowadays it's a sleepy backwater, with beautiful colonial architecture, sundrenched cobbled streets and loads of great places to stay and eat. And in this episode I spend the day wandering the streets of Honda with Carolina, an immigrant to Honda who decided to relocate there a few years ago; and Garza, a local fisher and occasional tour guide who's made an active decision to live a slow life, and focus on fishing and working with tourists in traditional and sustainable ways.





So I've stopped just a few kilometers from Honda, I should be there in about 5 minutes. I just wanted to reflect on the fact that I left Bogotá this morning, 2,650 meters above sea level, it was about 12 degrees centigrade at 7 o'clock this morning; and just a few short hours later I'm now at 385 meters above sea level. It's just after 11:00 in the morning and the temperature is in the mid-30s centigrade. It's one of the fascinating things about Colombia, with it being a mountainous equatorial country. You get these wild temperature variations according to altitude, not according to the season in which you're in.



So I've just got into Honda. I'm sitting in one of the city's many parks. Just in front of its Our Lady of 'El Rosario' church. Just as I drove through the town; it's a very picturesque town, I'm... It's got sort of lots of new developments, obviously, but I'm now in the old historical part of town which is full of lovely old colonial buildings, many of which have been very beautifully restored, and narrow streets. Most houses have a sort of overhanging roof that goes right to the edge of the pavement to provide shade for people walking past, which I always find lovely in this part of the world. Sort of really nice community spirit that when you build your house, you extend the roof out to provide shade to those walking by on the pavement.



Carolina: Hola Nick.

—¿Carolina?

Carolina: Sí...

—Hola, ¿cómo estás?

Carolina: Bien, ¿y tú? Mucho gusto

—Bien, lo mismo.

Carolina: ¿Cómo llegaste?

—¡Bien, súper!

Carolina: ¿Y la carretera?

—Bien, bajé por Vianí-Cambao para evitar el tráfico de...

Carolina: Estamos en el barrio El Alto del Rosario, y desde acá era como un mirador y donde los españoles tenían la posibilidad de vigilar todo lo que llegaba por el río.

So, Carolina said we should start by walking through the 'Alto del Rosario', which is quite a curious name because 'Alto' is like the 'high point'. We're probably about 20 meters higher than the rest of Honda, but I guess...

I mean, if you live in a very flat city you're gonna look for the 'high point' and call it 'El Alto'. It's a beautiful street, narrow street, lined with colonial houses on either side. So, the Spanish governors in colonial times used this high point as a place from which they could keep an eye on what was coming in, up the river. Beautiful little corner, actually.

Carolina: Esa connotación del puerto fluvial más importante de Colombia fue porque hasta Honda pudo llegar los vapores...

And so as Carolina and I wander the beautiful narrow cobble streets of Honda she starts telling me about why Honda became such an important river port. And it was because boats could not pass the river close to Honda. There's a geographical accident, they call it, it was a huge... It's a huge blockage of the river that they call 'El Salto de Honda'. And, whether you're going up or down river, if you wanted to continue past Honda, you had to unload everything -all of your passengers, all of your cargo- and transport it past the Salto de Honda to continue on its way. So Honda actually has two river ports: there's 'Arrancaplumas', which is a particularly poetic sound name, 'feather plucking port'; and 'Caracolí' on the other side. And all... Everything would be unloaded in one of the ports and moved across to the other port, reloaded onto another boat and it would continue on its journey. And originally this would have been done by mule, until the arrival of the train changed everything, and made things a bit quicker and a bit easier. And the Arrancaplumas port is further south, near a place called Puente Navarro; and on the other side is Caracolí.

And Caracolí is actually where we're heading after lunch. We're gonna go and meet Garza, the fisher, who's gonna take us out on the river and tell us about his life and how tourism has benefited him and his community.

📍 Garza: Usted también lleva su sobrenombre. Desde muy niño. Yo, por lo menos, desde muy niño soy 'Garza'.

So Garza says I can call him 'Garza'. It feels strange to me to be just meeting someone and using their nickname with them, but he said "It's fine, that's what everybody calls me, they call me that since I was a kid." And, yes, indeed, everybody has a nickname and the nickname goes on your gravestone as well.

📍 Garza: Tengo 57 años y como le cuento, más o menos desde los 8 años estoy pescando.

So Garza's been fishing since he was 8 years old; he's 57 now. He lives in a neighborhood called Caracolí -which we were talking about early- which is one of the river ports on the Magdalena river; I'll ask him a little bit about that in a moment. And so, yeah, he's been fishing his entire life. 49 years, that he can remember.

📍 Garza: El río Magdalena todos los días le enseña a usted cosas diferentes. Así usted esté muy...

And as Garza rows me up the river he continues to tell me about his life as a fisher. He said, you know, there's still things he doesn't know; the river still has things to teach him. Teaches him different things every day. He said "You gotta be really on the ball," he said "You gotta really keep your wits about you when you're on the river, and there's times where you almost lose your way because the river changes; it changes daily, it changes with the seasons. The shoreline changes. The position of the sandbars change. The wind changes



and it's easy to get caught out," he tells me. He says living and working this river is about knowing a lot; it's about understanding a lot. It's about being in touch with the river. It's not something you learn from one day to the next. It's something you learn during your life as a fisher. And he says the longer he fishes, the more he knows, the more he understands. He doesn't make as many mistakes as before; he knows how to fix his tools. And he said what he does is an art; and, in fact, he chooses to fish in a very traditional way. He has no motor in his canoe, he paddles it. And he said "It's not something you learn from one day to the next," he said, "the river is a living being and it surprises you everyday." And he's managed to structure this life and these surprises into working with tourists and working in tourism. So I tell him I'm interested in knowing more about this and how tourism has positively affected his life.

Garza: El turismo aquí... Beneficia a todos. A todos.

But then I asked him about tourism, and what tourism could represent for a community like his. And, he said, "Well that's the thing, tourism is great for us," he said "no, no, no, of course, we're the people who fish, we're the ones who provide Honda with its food, so... Tourism is absolutely fantastic. Local tourism, international tourism." He hopes that the tourists come, they fill the restaurants and they eat the fish that he catches; the local tourists, that they eat the fish and then they buy some fish to take home with them. So, really positive. It's not that he's going to necessarily work directly in tourism or have any direct contact with tourists, but it has a direct, tangible benefit for him and his community. The greater the amount of tourism in Honda, the greater the number of fish that they are able to sell.

I had a great day in Honda, in the Department of Tolima. Wandering the streets of the beautiful colonial old town with Carolina, hearing her stories. Went to a great place for lunch and then went off to meet Garza. And that was just a joy to be taken on the river Magdalena being paddled by a man who's chosen to live his life in a traditional way, who himself says he's taken a slow approach to life in this crazy modern world. That was a really great experience. Fantastic with great food, lovely people. An amazing place to visit.





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