

# STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

## Atlántico

**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.

# Atlántico

So I find myself sitting in the central courtyard of the absolutely gorgeous Prado Hotel, here in Barranquilla. It's one of Barranquilla's oldest, most traditional hotels, spilled in a sort of Republican style. That's absolutely... and it's an entire city block with the rooms and restaurants around the outside. And the central part of the hotel is this oasis of calm, and we're sitting underneath some palm trees, having some 'deditos de queso', which is a local specialty. It's a fried dow wrapped around gorgeous, delicious costeño cheese. And I find myself with Diana Costa Madiedo, Barranquillera. She has dedicated her life to working with culture in Barranquilla and in the wider department of Atlántico, which is the department that is what today's episode is about. Diana has kindly agreed to sit down with me for a few minutes and talk about her journey as the director of a number of different cultural institutions, as much in Barranquilla as in the department of Atlántico. And also,

one of Barranquilla's most famous annual events is the carnival, and Diana happens to have belonged to what they call a 'comparsa', a group that participates with a float in the carnival and she's been doing that for 30 years. So I'm really interested to hear from her, how the carnival has developed, and especially nowadays that it's so much easier to develop international connections and links. And I know she's also gonna talk about how the carnival, although it's Barranquilla-based, contributes to the cultural life across the Atlántico region, but also across the Colombian northern coast.



Diana's director of a number of different cultural institutions. She was director of the local Art Cinema. She was culture and heritage director in the department of Atlántico. And she was also director of a cultural department at the Universidad Del Norte, which is one of the largest and most important universities in this part of Colombia. And it was really interesting 'cause I asked her to tell me a little bit about her journey, directing, managing cultural projects in the region. And the first thing she really focused on was the heritage side of things because she said that in this department there's two components of heritage. There's the physical heritage component, so we're sitting... she said we're actually sitting in one right now. This hotel is a piece of physical heritage, but she focused much more on the intangible cultural heritage of the department and really started talking about the Barranquilla carnival, which she said is a super important event in Barranquilla annually. But it's not just about Barranquilla, and I'm going to ask her about that now because she told me when I was chatting to her before we began recording and she just touched on that again. Now that it extends way beyond Barranquilla as a city, it affects the intangible cultural heritage across the department, but also in neighboring departments of the coast. And I have a feeling that it's a cultural outlet for a load of different types of artists, whether that's musicians, visual artists. And I'm gonna ask Diana now to talk a little bit about the different types of culture which are involved in carnival. Also the history of carnival itself, because in this part of the world, obviously the Rio carnival is incredibly famous, but I think the Barranquilla carnival can probably give it a run for its money. We'll see what Diana thinks.





So I asked Diana to talk to us a little bit about the origins of carnival and I think the best way to summarize this, is she said, "look, we're such a massive mix of peoples here," they use the word 'mestizaje' to me. It's just a mix and she said "we're a mix of everything: the Spanish conquistadores, there are the original indigenous inhabitants of these lands." There was a huge amount of slavery, which is a rather unfortunate history. But the way that she talks about it within the context of carnival, is as the slaves either escaped or were freed or eventually, with the end of slavery towards the end of the eighteenth century in Colombia, different afro-Colombian communities began to emerge. The slaves... ex-slaves would congregate, and they'd form villages which were then known as palenques. So there were all of this different cultural expressions that came together in a very concentrated geographical area. And she said, as well, when you look at the costumes, dress, there were influences from all over the world in the way that people dressed. And all of this comes together to also a number of different ways that people would celebrate. But you've got all of these different cultural expressions happening, not just in Barranquilla. She also mentioned a village in the south of the department of Atlántico, which is called Santa Lucía, which has a very famous dance, and that dance has become an integral part of carnival. So you've got different music, different dance, different forms of dress which have developed from... which have origins in Europe, Africa and obviously with the original populations here, that all occurring in a very... relatively small, geographical area. But then there's a lot of cultural sharing and cultural overlap. And I'm going to find out now, how that turns into what we now know today as the carnival.

There was a lovely reflection from Diana on the importance of the river. Barranquilla sits on the river Magdalena, Colombia's national river. It runs all the way from the south of the country right out to the north, and it actually splits in two at one point, but the largest part, the principal part of the river estuary is in Barranquilla, so where we're sitting now. We're just a few hundred meters away from the river. And it flows past the city and out onto its way to the Caribbean Sea. And she said, so I asked her how all of these different musical expressions and cultural expressions came together to form the carnival. And she said, "no one's really sure when it happened or how it happened." But she said "it's all about the river." And I had to ask her... Colombians are very poetic, very poetic people. And the whole Gabriel García Márquez magical realism... It didn't happen by accident. It's a reflection of how Colombians think. So I have to ask her if her reference to the river was metaphorical, as in it came along the river, the river is a carrier, which brings things to Barranquilla. Or if it was literal, that people came along the river. And she looks at me and says, "it's actually a bit of both." The river is a metaphor for a journey, and for movement, but also quite literally, a lot of the original musicians, and other people, dancers, participating in carnival came from communities close to the river. So, the river was the source of all commerce in the department. Products would move up and down river to Barranquilla and back. And that would also put people into contact with each other. And she said, "people have always partied, but the river was what brought them together." And yeah, it's a great description of how people came together. It was the river, metaphorically, spiritually and literally, which is brilliant.



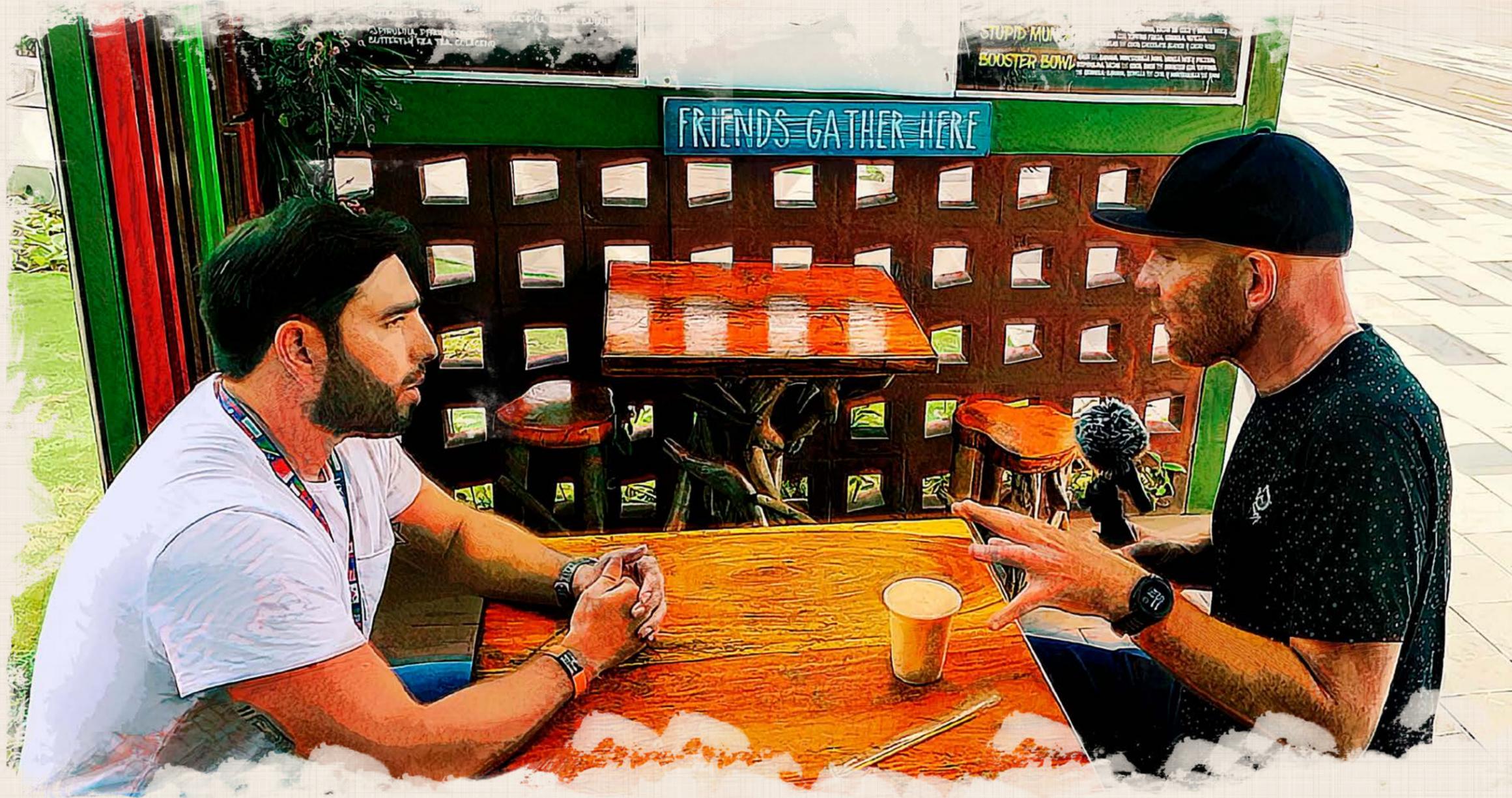
The next morning I head off to meet Jaime Alfaro. Jaime has spent many years working on tourism initiatives in Barranquilla, and I'm looking forward to asking him about what else the city has to offer, besides the carnival.

Jaime tells me that Barranquilla was populated by a number of different waves of migration. And this has really given the city the cosmopolitan character that it has today. It's given the city its different cultural, gastronomic architecture, and even religious aspects. And diversity is something, he tells me, that permeates all aspects of life in Barranquilla. And he tells me that obviously the reason that so many immigrants came to Barranquilla was its position as Colombia's most important port. It still is one of Colombia's most important ports and being this point of entry to Colombia meant that Spanish, German, French, Italian and other traders began to come to this part of the world and they began to give their own cosmopolitan vision of the age. We're talking about pre-1920s, and from 1920 onwards, Barranquilla began to develop much more rapidly and the development in there, the cultural and architectural developments that were happening in Barranquilla began to spread all the way down the Río Magdalena into the interior of Colombia. And so Jaime tells me that one of the first visible aspects of this cosmopolitan nature of Barranquilla is in its food. And we talk nowadays about fusion cuisine. He said "in Barranquilla we've always had fusion cuisine." There was huge Lebanese and Syrian immigration to Barranquilla last century and the one before. And a lot of Barranquilla's food has a definite Arabian flavor and aspect to it. There's also the typical fried fish and coconut rice that you find all over the Caribbean. Stews which come up from the interior of the country. And all of these ingredients and styles sort of mixed together, and mixed over a long

history in Barranquilla and made it what it is today as a gastronomic destination. Jaime goes on to tell me about the architecture of Barranquilla. And he said, "if you look around," for example, the neighborhood where I stayed last night, El Prado, he said "it's like a little slice of the history of Barranquilla." So you've got the old Colonial architecture, you've got newer Arab influences, you've

got Republican influences. And all of this mixes together into Barranquilla's visual aspect in its daily life. And the last thing that Jaime talked about was the diversity of religion in Barranquilla. He says that these waves of immigrants brought with them their religions and all of this mixes together. They are not segregated in Barranquilla. All mixed together in this cosmopolitan culture that is Barranquilla.

So I moved on to asking Jaime about carnival. You're in Barranquilla, you're with someone from Barranquilla. Jaime was not actually born in Barranquilla, but his dad's from here and he came to live here when he was 4 years old, so basically he's from Barranquilla. So, you know, I have to ask him about carnival. So I asked him what the carnival means to him as a person. Not for its tourism opportunities, and he said something really interesting...



fascinating. He said, "it's the one time of the year in Barranquilla where it doesn't matter who you are or which parts or sides you're from, everybody's equal." "It's the one time of the year when we all dance together, we all laugh together, we share drinks. And everybody's equal." He said, "the day after carnival, you might see one of those people in a shop and you won't even glance at each other." "You definitely want to say hello." But during carnival, "we're all equal."

It was fascinating to hear from Jaime and Diana. How the Barranquilla carnival brings people together and is really a moment of the year when everyone is equal. The actions in the streets and everyone's welcome to participate, regardless of their origins, credo, culture. Also hearing from Jaime, how multiple waves of immigration have contributed to making the city's architecture and gastronomy. A fusion of multiple elements that combine to represent modern day Barranquilla. A city of contrasts, surprises, and of course, a must-visit annual carnival





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