

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Vaupés

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.

Vaupés

So, today, I found myself in the department of Vaupés. Vaupés is in southeastern Colombia. You can only reach Vaupés by either flying into Mitú, which is the capital city of the department. I say capital city. It's a town of perhaps five thousand or so inhabitants. But it's the departmental capital. Or you can get here by boat on the Vaupés river, which I'll be talking to my guide today about a little bit later on. We'll talk about different options for traveling around the department. But, anyway, I flew in yesterday, had a nice afternoon wandering around the village. It was pouring with rain this morning as we are in the middle of the jungle and it can rain unexpectedly. So we had an absolute deluge this morning which made

it impossible to do anything, much less do anything that involved recording sound. And it's now a beautiful afternoon, there are a few clouds in the sky, but it looks like we're gonna have a good chance at a decent walk. I'm here with my guide here in Mitú, in Vaupés, which is Frank Montaña. Frank is a local guide, he's from one of the local indigenous communities, and he will be taking me on a walk through the Comunidad Mitú Sueño Urania.



So Frank's brought me to this place, the Mitú Sueño reserve. I asked him what kind of reserve it was, he said it's not a protected reserve, it's not a park. It's basically... I mean, they call it a reserve, but that's just because it's protected by the people who live here. And he said the reason he chose to bring me here, it's a beautiful mix of a local indigenous community which then a lab which we then walk through, which gives us the entry into the path we're going to be taking. And then it takes us off naturally into the jungle, and we're going to be having a wonderful day in the jungle. He said, obviously, nature is nature. We can't be guaranteed that we'll find anything, but the area we're walking in is famous for its amphibian life. We might well find some snakes as well. He said there will be bats along the way and a plethora of local indigenous bird life as well. So I'm really looking forward to this. Frank is someone who really knows his stuff in this part of the world, he's a professional tour guide, he's from the local indigenous community. So I'm looking forward to finding out a little bit more about this part of the world that I and, I think most Colombians know very little about because it is so difficult to get to but intensely rewarding when you do make it here. Excelente! Pues, vamos!



Frank and I have just wandered through the main parts of the village. It's a lovely little village with wooden houses lining either side of the Village Green, I guess would be the translation using an English sentence. In this case, the Village Green has a huge football pitch in the middle of it and just walking past the local community center, which is known as a Maloka in Colombian Spanish, and we're just about to wander off into the jungle.

So Frank just told me a lovely story about one of the local birds as we were walking past a tree. This bird started screeching at us, and he said it's a Kayuri and it has a peculiarity of being able to replicate the sounds of a number of the birds. And asked him why that was. And he said, well, the mythical reason is that at some point in the mists of time gone by, is that the bird was given this ability by a god to enable it to know when other birds in the jungle were gossiping about it. Just a beautiful way of putting it. So Frank, it's quite funny actually, Frank doesn't know the biological reason for why the Kayuri is able to replicate other bird songs. But the mythical reason I think is good enough for us. Who wouldn't want to know when people are gossiping about them?





And as we walk through the jungle surrounded by the sounds of birds in the trees, I asked Frank to tell me the kinds of birds that bird watchers will find here. And he says that in the department of Vaupés there's something in the region of 280 species of birds. He said you can expect to see Andean cock of the rocks, toucans, mocos, bayonet umbrella birds, harpy eagles, which he says is one of the largest of the eagles that exist in Colombia. And you'll also see hummingbirds, tanagers and quetzals.

So I just asked Frank a little bit about how he began to work in tourism. He studied sustainable biocommerce. And while he was studying, he realized that within the context of sustainable biocommerce sits tourism or the other way around, but whichever way it was, he says he realized the two were intimately connected. And so, he started thinking more and more about tourism. So then one day at Sena he heard about a new group which had been set up to looking in more detail into the local bird life and he joined the group. It's called Amazonía Motmot, and it was a group which was basically set up to look at how birdwatching and tourism could sit together in Vaupés, in this region where bird life is so abundant. And so he really got into bird watching. He said he still hadn't really thought too much about tourism as a profession for himself. He'd seen lots of connections, but then he just became fascinated by bird watching. And that led him into bird photography, and he started to learn more about photography and take photographs of birds and catalogue the birds that he'd photographed. And then that eventually led him into tourism.



Something that is very interesting, when you ask people in this part of the world, how they identify themselves. And Frank Sánchez said something really, really interesting. "First and foremost, I'm a Colombian. Second, I'm a proud member of the indigenous Kubea community. And third, I'm Amazonian." So he feels this mix of different cultures and he's

very clear on it, he said "I'm proudly 100% indigenous, my mom's from the Guanana ethnic group and my dad is Kubeo." And that's how Frank identifies himself.

I tell Frank that Vaupés seems to me to be a department which is perfect for adventurous tourists. It's a huge place and I ask him where

else he would recommend visiting in Vaupés. And he said there's a few places he'd like to mention, one of which is the Yuruparí rapids. Another one is Jirijirimo, which is another series of rapids. And there's also Bogotá Cachivera, it's called. And these are all places, he says, which are fascinating geologically and also have beautiful vistas, and an amazing

variety of flora and fauna. And these are day trips, he says, that you can do. So I ask him about multiple days spent out in the jungle. And he said it's really important that you do your research. This department is huge and a lot of the places are quite difficult to access. You should get in touch with the local tour operator because they have contacts with the

owners and pilots of the small planes that fly between jungle airstrips in this region. And he said that there are lots of opportunities once you've got hold of your tour operator and let them know the level of adventure that you're looking for. And he said there's loads you can do. You can go for 3, 4, 6 day trips or even longer depending on how long you have here and what you want to do in the department of Vaupés.





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