

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Chocó

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.

Chocó

—¿Y cómo está todo?

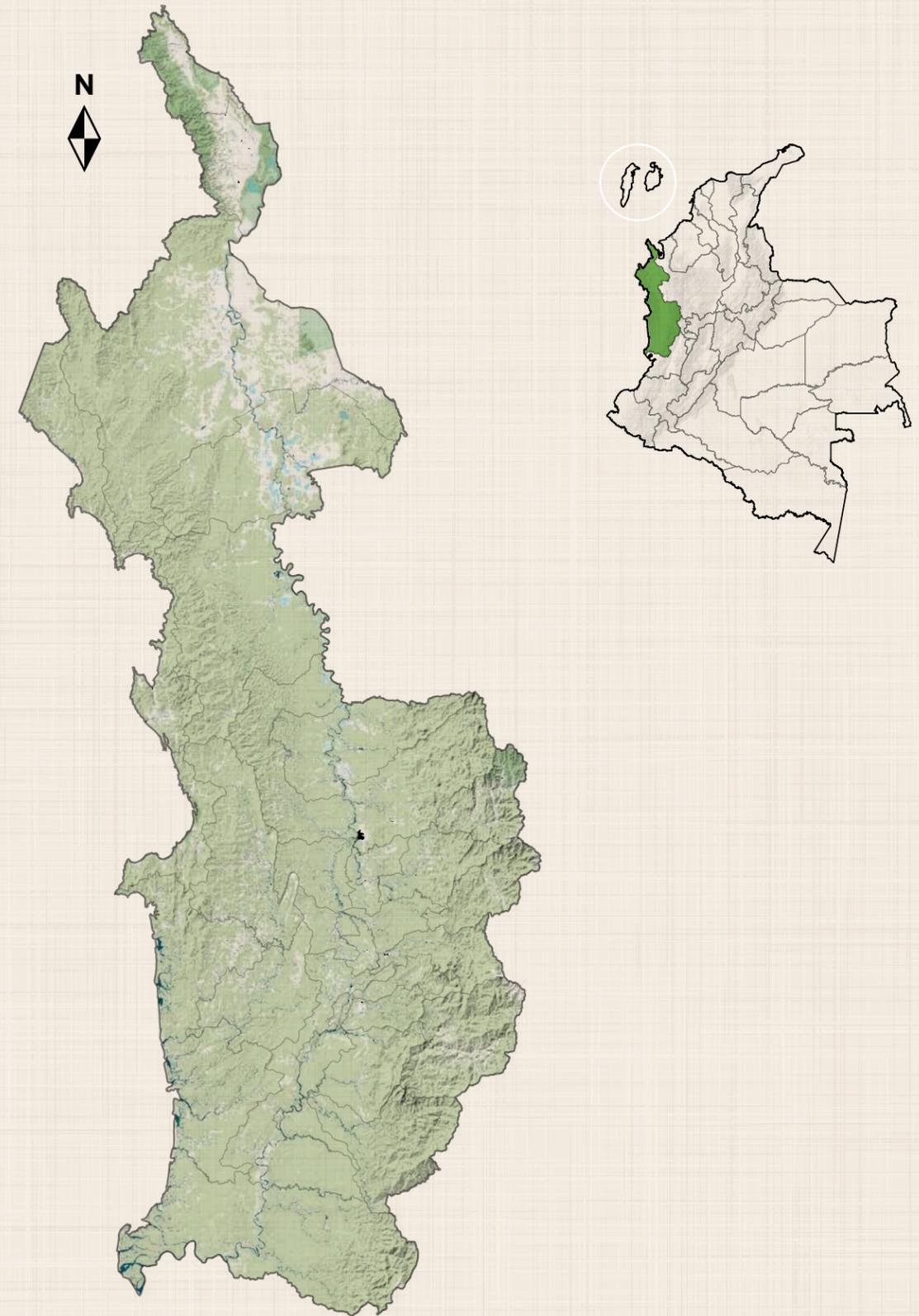
Juan: Bien, gracias a Dios.

—¿Y el turismo se está reactivando?

So I just arrived in the Department of Chocó, in northwestern Colombia. Chocó is a Department on the Pacific coast of Colombia, very sparsely populated. So I just flew into Nuquí, which is a little town right on the coast and from here I'm gonna go down to Jovi, which is a place I've been in before; I was there teaching English a few years ago, and lived there for a month. Little town with actually no motorized vehicles. There's a boat, like a municipal boat, which comes in and out once you're in the town. That's it. A really fascinating place, surrounded by mangrove forests and peaceful beaches and pristine jungle. So I'm just waiting for Juan, my boat driver, standing on one of the many docks in Nuquí and when Juan arrives we will be taking a speed boat down the coast, down south. It's about 30-40 minutes and we get to Jovi, which is where I'll be staying.

So I'm here, I made it to the beautiful little corner of Jovi known as Guachalito. Took us about half an hour by speed boat from Nuquí. This really is a beautiful spot. Beaches

are a really deep dark brown color which is because of the mix of white and black sand and rocky outcrops up and down the beach in every direction. And it's a tourism destination. If you're looking for some peace and quiet, just get away from the world. It's fantastic. Even connectivity is limited which is actually fantastic for a great break from the hustle and bustle of modern connected life. And it's not that you are completely unconnected. Benjamín was telling me earlier that he does have a satellite internet connection; he said it's really slow. I mean, if you are in urgent need of communication you can hook up to the satellite connection and if there's a medical emergency or something like that there's a radio connection that connects to Nuquí, the nearest town where I flew into this morning. So if there's a medical emergency or something like this you're not completely cut off, but you are definitely left a lot with your own thoughts.



So as you can probably hear I'm on the beach in Guachalito, I'm here with Benjamín Gonzalez who's the founder of a beautiful hotel right on the beach. It's not, it's more than a hotel, it's like Benjamín's home where he's built some extra *cabañas* for people to stay in.

👤 Benjamín González: Mi nombre es Benjamín González. Soy nacido y criado aquí en esta playa de Guachalito. Soy pionero en el turismo local...

So Benjamín's been... He was born here in Guachalito, he has lived here all his life and he's one of the tourism pioneers here, since 1984, he's been working on his tourism project.

👤 Benjamín González: El turismo aquí en Guachalito nacieron de unos amigos que vinieron en esa época en el 84. Vinieron buscando, digamos, sitio para acampar. Y desde esa época recibimos un grupo de 18 personas.

So, Benjamín is telling me that, as so many of these stories do, this one began completely by chance. I mean, he lives here, and one day a couple of tourists turned up and they were looking for somewhere to camp. I mean, somewhere to camp on the beach. And they got chatting and then sort of knocked around ideas and the seed was sown in Benjamín's mind and then took him a while to get going, but in 1990 he started building what is now The Joviseña. And he works as very much a community tourism kind of coordinator in the area where he brings together people from the different surrounding villages. We're gonna go to the village of Jovi later on and go up river to a waterfall. Tomorrow we're gonna go to a place called Termales, he was telling me



about, which is famous for its thermal springs, which is going to be interesting, jumping in a thermal spring in this heat; I mean, it must be in the high twenties centigrade at the moment, as I'm speaking to you, just before midday. We got a nice breeze coming in off the sea, but it's going to be interesting to see what thermal springs are like in this heat. So up until the late 80s, early 90s, Benjamín-like everybody here- was a fisherman and a farmer, and I asked him if he's been able to keep up his fishing and farming or if he's now a hundred percent dedicated to tourism. He said no, he loves his old profession. It's not something he wanted to give up, he just found other opportunities with tourism. But he still fishes and doesn't farm as much but he keeps a kitchen garden as it were in The Joviseña where he's got some fruits and vegetables which he uses in The Joviseña and lots and lots of herbs, medicinal herbs as well as aromatic herbs.

This is absolutely gorgeous. I'm right in the middle of what is now virgin forest jungle in the Pacific coast of Colombia. Just arriving at the 'Waterfall of Love', 'La Cascada del Amor', completely surrounded by greenery. The trees towering above me, many of them with vines hanging down off them, I mean, right back down to the earth. Plants of a thousand varieties and it's a great walk, really nice, lovely to feel the ground under my feet as it changes from mud to stone, to rock, to sand, wading through rivers, and well worth it to get up to this absolutely gorgeous spot. I'm going to go for a dip.



Benjamín González: Estamos en la playa de Terco hasta Arusí, uno de los corregimientos de Termales, Apartadó y Arusí...

Benjamín was just telling me, we have come to a Turtle Freeing session, which is a conservation group that collects turtle eggs and protects them from predators until they hatch. And today the hatchlings have been released and we're just walking up to a line marked in the sand where you can't cross and there are probably twenty or thirty tiny little turtles all rushing down to the sea. It's absolutely beautiful.

And this is amazing. Just as we were leaving the turtle liberation site, we're heading towards the little village of Termales, where the thermal springs are. And then all of a sudden, all of a sudden Benjamín's boat man, standing on the prow of the boat as lookout, shouted "mister, hey, there's a whale!" and way over in the distance we can see this splashing.



And as we go nearer we start to see the tail, huge tail coming up out of the water. As the whale surfaces to breathe we've come racing over to the other side of the bay, she's right in front of us. This is absolutely gorgeous. We're just a few hundred meters from the coast and there's an enormous whale surfacing to breathe right in front of us. She's right here. Wow! I mean, literally meters. I could almost reach out and touch it. This is such a privilege. She's right next to the boat now. Just keeps on coming up for air. Don't know if she's curious or if she's fishing. I don't know what she's doing, but she's literally right here next to us. This is absolutely incredible. And just as we were talking two whales surfaced, they're right next to the boat again, I mean, just, just meters away from where I'm talking to you. And there are two, which would be, which would be mother and calf.

Benjamín González: Ellas, cuando andan con cría, es difícil que saquen la cola.

So Benjamín is telling me that this pair would be mother and child, and he said basically "don't get too excited, we're not gonna see her raise her tail out of the water today." He says that's very, very unusual when the mother's with the calf for her to raise her tail as she dives. It's something to do with the way that she, she swims alongside and protects the calf. But I don't care whether we see a whale's tail or not, I've just had two whales swimming right next to the boat, I mean, for the last 10 minutes. I mean, it's just amazing. I don't know what it is, you know, it's just this grey shape that comes out of the water, but it's an incredibly emotional thing for me and I think for many others, which is why so many people come here for whale watching.

So we're just looking at a thermal pool, it's slightly sulfurous smelling but very, very clear water. And Benjamín was telling me that this pool was built by the community, with community and public funds. And what happened was this was in private hands originally, this whole area, it was somebody from the local community who owned the land and allowed the community to bring tourists here to bathe in the hot springs. And then a few years ago, the community got together and it was an initiative with the local municipality and the community put in half the money, the municipality put in the other half of the money and they purchased the land actually, so that it's now community and community run. And it's run by the community for the benefit of the whole community. Income is shared amongst the community, responsibilities are shared with the community and it's a beautiful sight. The thermal springs, actually, literally rise up out of the earth right next to where I'm standing now looking down into the pool. The pool's basically a concrete border, which has been built around the original stone. So you can still, you still got the original stone that you can see at the base of the pool. You can see where the water comes rushing in. And then running by the side of the pool is a little creek and we're right in the middle of the jungle. I'm surrounded by trees and greenery. That's... It's absolutely gorgeous.

And sadly, the time has come for me to leave Guachalito too soon. Way too soon. Good thing is I don't yet have to leave Chocó. I'm heading back to Nuquí, and when I get to Nuquí I'm going to be meeting Iris González who is Benjamín's sister. I'm going to be talking about food and the amazing culinary delights to be found in Chocó.



Iris González: Yo soy Nimia Iris González Valdés, soy del municipio de Nuquí, Chocó, nacida en la plata de Guachalito, una de las mejores playas que tiene el municipio de Nuquí.

So, Iris is actually a Guachalito native. In fact, she's Benjamín's sister, for full disclosure, and she now lives in Nuquí because of her work, she says. It makes more sense for her to live in the municipality rather than out in one of the outlying areas.

Iris González: Yo me dedico a varias actividades. Especialmente, de la gastronomía tradicional.

When I ask Iris what she does, she responds –as is true for so many people in this part of the world– that she does all sorts of different things. But the one thing that she spends most of her time on is the local cuisine, traditional cuisine. She said it's what she feels that she's best at, and it's also part of the fundamental culture of her people. She said she's loved working with food all of her life, and this love of food comes from her ancestors, from her grandmother, her mother, her aunts. She says it's a tradition which we have to keep alive. And to keep it alive, one of the things that she does is to work on, as she says, rescuing this traditional cuisine, the cuisine of her ancestors.

Iris González: Todos nos beneficiamos del turismo. Unos en menor escala, otros en mayor escala, pero todos...

That's really interesting. Iris has a very positive view of tourism in the local region, so I asked her what benefits tourism has brought to different members of the community. And she said: "Listen, tourism touches everybody here." She said, "it's a fundamental part of the local economy. You don't have to be a hotel owner or a restaurant owner to benefit from tourism," because, as she said, you know, the hotel owners need staff, the restaurants need food, so, whether you're a fisher, or whether you're an agriculturalist, or whatever you are, you will in some way, be obtaining a benefit from tourism. Something else she said, which a lot of people have mentioned as I've been interviewing people on this podcast, which is when I think one of my favorite common factors across Colombia is, she talks about the interchange of tourism. She said, "it's not just people coming to my restaurant and eating my food and me showing them about traditional food and traditional recipes. It's about the exchange and when they're in my kitchen, I show them my stuff and they talk to me about their stuff and I learn from them in the same way that they learn from me." So, she sees stories and really, not just as a one-way street of people coming to learn about and enjoy this beautiful natural environment, but also bringing something of theirs to leave behind in this natural environment. As in, you know, some part of their knowledge to leave behind in this natural environment.





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