

## **Squiz the World goes to... Colombia**

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a country with more bird species than any other on Earth, that produces some of the world's most famous coffee, and where long ago, a ruler covered himself in gold dust — sparking a legend about a lost city of treasure.

Can you guess? ... Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Colombia.

### **JUST THE FACTS**

Colombia sits in the north-west corner of South America. It shares borders with Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador. And here's a geographical flex — it's the only country in South America with coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

The country's name comes from Christopher Columbus, the Italian navigator whose last name inspired "Colombia," and the capital city is Bogotá, which sits high in the Andes Mountains at more than 2,600 metres above sea level. There are around 52 million people living in Colombia today.

"Geographically, it's dramatic. The Andes Mountains slice through the country and split into three ranges. In the south lies part of the Amazon rainforest. In the north, there are warm Caribbean beaches. On the Pacific side, thick rainforest tumbles down to the ocean. There are wide plains called the Llanos and rolling hills in the coffee-growing region known as the Zona Cafetera.

There are also snow-capped volcanoes because Colombia sits along the Pacific Ring of Fire where tectonic plates meet. "

All that variety makes Colombia one of the most biodiverse countries on Earth. With more than 1900 bird species, jaguars roaming its forests, sloths hanging lazily from branches, spectacled bears (they just look like they're wearing glasses) wander mountain slopes, poison dart frogs glow in bright colours, and yes, pink river dolphins swim in Amazon waters...wow!

Not so well known is that Colombia is also often recognised for its healthcare system, which has ranked highly across the Americas, the quality of care does vary across the country though. And after quite a significant history of violence, in recent decades, the country has introduced progressive laws around gender equality, LGBT rights, animal welfare and human rights. Colombia today is a modern nation that continues to evolve.

But long before modern cities and mountain cable cars, people were already living on this land.

## TIME TRAVEL

Indigenous peoples inhabited the territory that is now Colombia as far back as 12,500 BCE. Over thousands of years, early hunter-gatherer communities gradually transitioned into farming societies. Permanent settlements were established. Pottery appeared. By the first millennium BCE, organised societies had developed political systems led by chiefs known as caciques.

One of these groups, the Muisca people, lived mainly in the highlands near what is now Bogotá. They farmed maize, potatoes, quinoa and cotton. They traded gold, emeralds, textiles and rock salt with neighbouring groups. Gold was deeply spiritual, not just decorative. When a new Muisca leader was chosen, a ceremony took place at a sacred lake. According to later accounts, the ruler covered himself in gold dust and sailed out onto the water on a raft, offering gold and emeralds to the gods.

"Spanish conquistadors arrived in what is now Colombia in the 1500s. Conquistadors were Spanish conquerors who travelled to the Americas seeking land, gold and power, and claimed territory for Spain.

They heard the Muisca story and misunderstood it. They imagined a whole city made of treasure. They called it El Dorado — "The Golden One." For years they searched rivers, mountains and jungles for a golden city that never existed.

Spain ruled the region for centuries, shaping its language and religion. In the early 1800s, independence movements led by figures like Simón Bolívar helped Colombia break free from Spanish control."

Today, Colombia's rich cultural heritage reflects all those layers. Its language, religion, cuisine and art show the influence of Indigenous civilisations, Spanish colonisation, African migrants and later immigration from Europe and the Middle East. Spanish is the official language, but dozens of Indigenous and regional languages are also recognised.

And we're not stopping there... Colombia is full of even more surprises...

## BELIEVE IT OR NOT

Nowhere do those all the blended influences throughout Colombia's history come together more spectacularly than in the Caribbean city of Barranquilla. The Barranquilla Carnival combines Indigenous traditions, Spanish pre-Lent celebrations and African rhythms fuse into four days of music, colour and dance. Costumes shimmer, drums thunder and the streets burst with energy. It's one of the largest carnivals in the world. Also from the Caribbean coast comes global pop star Shakira, whose music carries Colombian rhythms around the world.

This diverse country is also home to a river called Caño Cristales that's often nicknamed the River of Five Colours. At certain times of year, special aquatic plants turn the water vivid shades of red, yellow and green. It looks as though someone tipped a giant paint set into the jungle.

And that's not all... Colombia's national sport isn't football. It's tejo. Get this... players throw a heavy metal disc at a clay board fitted with tiny packets of gunpowder. Hit the target just right and — pop. Probably won't be trying that in PE any time soon!

But it hasn't all been smooth sailing for Colombia though...During a difficult period in the late twentieth century, an infamous drug lord named Pablo Escobar built a private estate there, that included a zoo filled with exotic animals.... think giraffes, zebras, and elephants amongst others. After his death most of the animals were relocated, but some hippos remained and multiplied. With no natural predators in Colombia and plenty of river habitat, today there are well over a hundred living in the wild, and they're considered an invasive species.

"From rainbow rivers to carnival drums to hippos... Colombia keeps surprising us.

Now, after all that exploring, lets get down to business because it's..."

## TIME FOR SCHOOL

In Colombia, education is compulsory from early childhood through the mid-teen years. Public schooling is free, although private schools also operate. Students move through preschool, five years of primary school and then secondary education, and uniforms are common.

"The school day usually runs for around six to seven hours. In many cities, schools operate in shifts because there are not enough classrooms for all students at once. One group attends in the morning, another in the afternoon.

Getting to school can look very different depending on geography. In cities, children may walk or take buses. In the steep valley city of Medellín, some students ride cable cars called the Metrocable down from mountainside neighbourhoods to connect with the metro system. Imagine gliding above rooftops on your way to class."

"In rural regions, children might travel by motorbike, colourful chiva buses, on foot, or by boat along Amazon rivers. In remote mountain communities, schools can be small, sometimes with mixed-age classes learning together.

Just like in Australia, where you live shapes your school experience."

If you're anything like me, after a long day of learning — whether you arrived by cable car or canoe — you'd probably be ready for something delicious.

## DINNER TIME

"First up for the adults listening, Colombia is one of the world's largest producers of coffee. Beans grown in cool mountain regions are exported across the globe. Yep, it's mostly a grown-ups' drink, but it's a huge part of the country's identity.

For kids, you're more likely to tuck into arepas — warm cornmeal patties split open and filled with cheese, meat or eggs. Empanadas are another favourite, crispy pastries stuffed with savoury fillings."

If you're feeling especially hungry (which I definitely am now), there's bandeja paisa — a generous platter piled high with rice, beans, meat, egg and sweet plantain ( a fruit that is part of the banana family). This is the kind of meal that feels like a celebration on a plate.

So, from golden legends to snow-capped volcanoes, from cable cars in the mountains to carnivals by the sea, Colombia is a country bursting with colour, resilience and rhythm.

## THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

"What is the capital city of Colombia?"

- A) Cartagena
- B) Bogotá
- C) Lima"

"True or False: Colombia has more insect species than any other country in the world.

False. It has more bird species."

"Colombia's national sport, tejo, involves throwing a metal disc at what unusual target?"

- A) A moving llama
- B) A floating coconut
- C) A clay board with small gunpowder packets"

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Colombia.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.