

## EJE CAFETERO



map of „Eje Cafetero“

### FACTS

<b>Surface:</b>	<b>13,873 m<sup>2</sup></b>
<b>Inhabitants:</b>	<b>2,810,768 (2005)</b>
<b>Language:</b>	<b>Spanish</b>
<b>Religion:</b>	<b>Catholic</b>

### INTRODUCTION

Eje Cafetero, the coffee-growing zone, is located in the central western part of Colombia, in the canyon of the Cauca River. It is enclosed by two mountain ranges; the Andes and the Cordillera Occidental. The area is part of three districts: Caldas, Quindio and Risaralda. The region is often referred to as Paisa, a shortening of the Spanish word paisano and was earlier used to describe the people and the culture that developed in the central mountains during the republican period. Today paisa is a widely used term for the inhabitants of Antioquia and the citizens of Medellín, but probably most people in Eje Cafetero would identify themselves with the term paisa.

### HISTORY

The Cauca valley was not colonized until the 19th century, during the republican period. The colonization started from Antioquia in the north, running southwards along the canyon, and is generally referred to as the colonización Antioqueña. The process of settlement lasted for almost a century and great emphasis was put on the foundation of villages.

Due to the climatic conditions coffee has been the main agricultural product since the 1860s and at the beginning of the 20th century coffee was the largest Colombian export. But falling coffee prices have caused financial instability in the re-



gion. Several efforts have been made to develop other agricultural cultivations as there are sugar cane, yucca, potatoes, corn, beans and citrus fruits. Also coca is cultivated - illegally of course, but can be regarded as the economic background for some regions.

Today there are about 570.000 coffee farmers in Eje Cafetero.

### ETHNICAL GROUPS

Most inhabitants of the region are of Spanish ancestry but there are also Mestizos, Indigenous and African people. Most inhabitants of the region are of Spanish ancestry but there are also Mestizos, Indigenous and African people.

### TOPOGRAPHY, CLIMATE AND VEGETATION

Caldas, Quindio and Risaralda are located between two mountain ranges: the Andes and the Cordillera Occidental. The area is, due to altitude, divided into three major climatic regions. The Andean region from 2.500m – 3700 m, the Sub-Andean region falling down to 1.200 m and in the valleys the Tropical or Equatorial region from 1000 m - 300 m. The average annual temperature and the precipitation are depending on the altitude. From 3800-4500 m the temperature and precipitation vary between 0°-6°C and 1500-2000 mm.

From 2300-3800 m, the temperature and precipitation vary between 6°-14°C and 2000-3000 mm. From 1100-2300 m, the average temperature and precipitation vary between 14°-20°C and 2000-2300 mm. Below 700 metres the average annual temperature varies between 24°-28°C and the minimum annual precipitation is 1000-1500 mm.

The most rain falls in April-May and October-November, and the driest periods are in January-February and July-August.

There are strong humid winds from the Pacific Ocean and the western slopes receive more moisture than the eastern slopes.

In the highlands, the vegetation mainly consists of bunchgrass fields; in mid-altitude zone there are many forests, some of oak but in the lower zones the forests are much drier.

In the high páramo, glaciers and snow cover the mountain crests and numerous lakes constitute an important reservoir for water that supports the agriculture of major parts of the region.

There are several National Parks in Eje Cafetero of which Los Nevados National Park is the largest with several active volcanoes and summits reaching over 5.000 metres. Threatened fauna in the region include mountain tapir and spectacled bear.



Landscape of Eje Cafetero / Guadua

Eje Cafetero has had several serious earthquakes and volcanic eruptions over the last decades.

On 25 January 1999 an earthquake, measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale, occurred near the city of Armenia, the provincial capital of Quindio. More than thirty aftershocks followed, all registering near 5.5 on the Richter scale. In Armenia, with a population of 224,000, it has been estimated that about 70 percent of the buildings were either destroyed or were so badly damaged that they had to be demolished. The Colombian Red Cross reported a total of 1,171 deaths and 4,765 injuries. Also Manizales, provincial capital of Caldas, had been damaged badly. At least 45,000 houses were destroyed or damaged and up to 425,000 people were affected by the earthquake. In November 1985 when the Volcano Nevado Del Ruiz erupted, a couple of villages were buried under lava masses.

CONTINENT: South America > COUNTRY: Colombia > REGION: **Eje Cafetero (Coffee belt)**

## ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGIES

Vernacular architecture in Eje Cafetero is generally referred to as "Paisa". There are no fixed types of dwellings but rather a way of dealing with the difficult topographical conditions. The settlement process during the "colonización Antioqueña" led to the foundation of many villages. The structure of these settlements is strongly influenced by Spanish tradition with a strict street grid proceeding from the main point of the village. The sites are often very steep but all houses are laterally aligned. The front side of the houses oriented towards the streets create carefully maintained salient social space, where people meet and trade. The facades - and only those towards the streets - are plastered or lime washed and painted in vivid colours.

In contrast to earlier settlements central parks replaced the main plaza. The town church was placed on one side of the park and - following the ideas of Inquisition - built upon a base needing several steps to enter.

A very interesting building type is the helda house. It combines the sun-drying of the coffee beans with living through a wooden platform under the roof. The roof itself is either mounted on rails to be moved along the axis of the house or constructed as two "wings" which can be unfolded.

The paisa-houses are built in bahareque technique; the main constructing material is local guadua-bamboo, combined with wood and adobe. Despite the outstanding constructing qualities, over the last decades guadua-techniques have been replaced by the desire of constructing in brick and concrete. These are referred to as "materials" in contrast to guadua, wood and adobe ("no-materials"). Locally grown goods would not meet the idea of modern and secure housing, and are stigmatized as "poor".

There is a growing interest in guadua constructions. The Colombian architect Dicken Castro carefully documented many villages during the 60s and 70s and today star architects like Benjamin Villegas and Simón Vélez are well known for their contemporary guadua buildings. One of the main reasons for the research is the excellent material quality of guadua under the aspect of earthquake secure constructions. Several workshops are held in the region to bring about the know-how in growing and building with guadua.



*Bahareque Buildings in Eje Cafetero*

### Images:

all photographs by Christina Jeménez Mattsson, September 2005;  
map drawing by Frank Drenckhahn

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