

COLOMBIAN TOURISM CONCERNED BY THE ONGOING APPEAL OF PABLO ESCOBAR



Colombia has experienced a dramatic shift in its developments, tourist appeal and visitor numbers in recent years in its ongoing attempts to improve its image and potential, with two million holidaymakers visiting in 2013 and the industry continuing to grow by around 7% per year. Security measures, business opportunities and marketing campaigns are all improving and there are many positive developments within the cities such as better infrastructure and public facilities.

One of the cities that is experiencing a promising boom in its prosperity and tourism opportunities in Medellin and many attribute this to the combination of the climate, entrepreneurial spirit of the younger generation and the improving safety records. Today youthful business owners are setting up new restaurants and tours to tap into the current needs and interests of foreign tourists and the city is dramatically safer now that the murder rate has fallen 80% since 1991. In these highly publicised years of drugs, shootouts and warfare between militias and gangsters there were 6,349 murders as the conflict and criminal activities reached their heights. Today, this period of violence should be far behind the city as it tries to rebuild its tourism industry and image; the problem is that one of Colombia's most notorious gangsters is responsible for bringing in a lot of cash from curious foreign visitors.

The Colombian tourism industry has a big obstacle in its way: El Patron.

El Patron, otherwise known as Pablo Escobar, is a figure that many Colombians would like to leave in the past. The problem is that many foreign visitors are drawn to the country by his fame and colourful life of drugs, women and violence and he has become their top tourist attraction. These tourists keenly take part in specialised tours to see the site of his last stand and his grave, which is said to be the second most visited tomb in all of South America. People come because he has been glamorised by Western film and is almost seen as a modern day Robin Hood; however, tour guides and local authorities are keen to change this image and show El Patron in a more realistic light, highlighting his murderous, negative side as well as his hidden fortunes for a sense of balance.

Some will continue to see the positives in this ongoing visitor interest in Escobar, especially when the \$20-per-person tours are so profitable, but others remain concerned about the connection between their country and this celebrated gangster, fearing it will continue to harm their attempts to improve their image. Some tour guides say they have grown to hate the man and Medellin's tourism sub-secretary has spoken out about the desire to draw attention away from him to other, positive changes in the city. While tour operators try and fix current attitudes with their balanced tour packages, the nation is tackling problematic preconceptions of the country with its media campaign with a nod to its past and also hope for the future: a sign greeting arriving passengers at Bogota Airport reads "Colombia: The only risk is wanting to stay".

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