

COLOMBIA'S TOURISM PARADOX: RECORD VISITOR NUMBERS, BUT HOTELS STRUGGLE



Early signs point to sustained momentum in Colombia's tourism sector. By 2025, visitor numbers climbed close to 6 million international travelers. Revenue from these guests totaled \$9.427 billion - exceeding income once dominated by petroleum exports. Growth didn't slow; instead, it anchored broader financial inflows. Spending patterns stayed firm, reinforcing tourism's role in national cash flow. Economic ripple effects now trace back to traveler activity across regions.

Still, gains remain uneven across the field. A study by Corficolombiana called "Tourism boom?" reveals **small hotels and eateries expanded only 0.5% last year, trailing behind the country's overall growth at 2.6%**. Worse off are lodging businesses - real earnings dipped 2.9%. From 51% down to 50%, room use has weakened. Losing momentum, the segment struggles on.

The Rise of Tourist Homes

Nowhere has the shift been clearer than in Colombia's lodging market, where short stays and holiday properties have surged ahead. Growth here reached 635 percent after 2020, far outpacing conventional hotels, which saw just a fraction of that rise. More than 76,000 vacation units now appear on official records, while hotel entries hover near 20,000. Not long ago, those numbers told a different story entirely. Until 2021, traditional lodgings outnumbered their temporary counterparts.

Even now, visitors keep arriving in Colombia - though fewer settle into traditional hotels. Instead, many opt for options beyond the usual lodging scene. What drives this? A need for freedom in schedules, personal space, sometimes cheaper rates. As experts point out, travel numbers and money spent remain strong - but hotels see less of it. Arrival counts hold steady; stays just happen elsewhere these days.

Rising Hotel Rates and Job Market Pressures

Though often overlooked, rising expenses now weigh heavily on hotels. Public service fees climb higher, while changes to labor laws alongside elevated minimum pay standards pushed sector wages up by 10.3%. Since employee compensation makes up just over 30% of daily operational spending, margins tightened fast. Job reductions followed swiftly - almost six thousand positions disappeared early in 2026 alone. Behind these numbers, the national hotel association confirms a deeper trend: roughly 13 000 positions vanished across three years.

Early 2026 saw the weakest job count for January-February in half a decade within the sector, due to softer consumer interest - recreational travel hit particularly hard. Though seasonal patterns often shift, this dip stands out against recent trends, driven mainly by declining visitor numbers rather than broader economic forces.

Insecurity Undermines Confidence

Worsening safety concerns add pressure on already changing systems, harming how the nation is

viewed abroad while pushing visitors away. At times, foreign arrivals have fallen close to 8 percent, according to Cotelco, which traces this decline squarely to rising insecurity. Though economic patterns shift slowly, sudden drops in tourist numbers reflect immediate fears rather than long-term trends. Not every region faces equal impact - some see sharper declines where unrest appears more visible.

Among the measures highlighted by the guild are:

- Kidnappings surged 211% in the second half of 2025 nationally.
- In major cities, kidnappings grew 103% in January-February 2026 compared to the same period the previous year.
- Acts of terrorism increased by 28% in the second half of 2025.

Because of worsening safety conditions, hotel owners face more reservation cutbacks. Insurance costs have climbed, making coverage harder to maintain. Operating in some zones now brings added challenges. The industry group pointed out that slipping security harms business function, public image, and customer interest. Trust in a destination depends heavily on stability. Without reliable protection, attracting visitors - local or foreign - becomes far tougher.

One year saw 837 road blockages, a rise of 12.8% from 2023 to 2025, causing roughly \$11.3 billion pesos in damage. Though reasons differ, such disruptions now happen often enough to seem routine. Because of this pattern, travel plans shift and deliveries slow down. Movement across key routes weakens when closures repeat without warning.

A Tough Future for Domestic Travel

Despite making up most overnight stays, local travel runs into trouble as household spending cools and certain spots feel less safe. **Even though overall numbers seem strong, older hotels often miss out on the gains.**

Surprisingly, the report frames rising tourism in Colombia as contradictory - while visitor counts climb, the Colombian hotel industry sees little improvement. Despite growth on paper, benefits aren't reaching established lodging businesses. This gap highlights a mismatch between overall trends and sector performance. Numbers go up; outcomes do not follow. Progress appears uneven when examined closely.

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