

Pablo Escobar Slept Here: Is It Too Soon for Narco-Tourism?

By Christine Jenkins Tanzi 14.11.2017 for Bloomberg

Aram Balakjian, a 33-year-old Londoner, had a great time on his seven-month trip to Colombia last year. He toured the countryside on a motorbike, taking in sights like the Chicamocha Canyon, and polished his Spanish at a school in Medellín. He also took part in a raucous game of paintball at a decrepit lakeside villa that once belonged to Pablo Escobar. There, he and about a dozen other tourists ran around blasting each other with paint pellets. Balakjian got to play the drug kingpin himself. Holed up on the second floor and running low on ammo, he was taken down in a sneak attack by a pretend U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent.

It's all fun and games to travelers streaming into Colombia seeking a real-life connection to the hit Netflix series *Narcos*, which depicts Escobar's transformation from small-time dealer to drug lord with a net worth of more than \$2 billion in 1987, according to *Forbes*. Tourists can check out his grave and the now-abandoned apartment building where his family lived. They can also pay hundreds of dollars to schedule visits with Escobar's relatives and members of his entourage who promise an inside look at the cartel leader's life, which ended in a Dec. 2, 1993, shootout with security forces. As many as 1 in 10 international visitors to Colombia are lured there by TV shows or movies that feature the country, according to TCI Research, a Brussels-based agency.

Many Colombians who lived through two brutal decades of bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, and drug-fueled corruption are upset to see a cold-blooded killer elevated to celebrity status. "For us as a society, it was still too soon. We weren't ready," says Adriana Valderrama, who heads the Museo Casa de la Memoria, a local museum devoted to the various conflicts that have ripped through the region and the country. "It's a painful past, and it's relatively recent," she says.

Of course, Medellín wouldn't be the first town to cash in on the notoriety of its hometown criminals. But in Colombia, where more than 200,000 people have died in conflict over the past half-century, the wounds are still fresh. Moreover, the boom in narco-tourism comes at a time when the country is trying to remake its image. According to the latest data from the World Bank, Colombia's homicide rate in 2015 was less than half what it was in 1995. The signing of a peace accord last year that required the largest left-wing guerrilla group to disarm has also improved the security situation.

That's opened a swath of Colombia's hinterlands to nature lovers, including birdwatchers who'll gladly fork over as much as \$4,600 for weeklong tours into the jungle to view toucans, macaws, and other exotic birds. "Colombia is a paradise that the world wants to get to know," tweeted President Juan Manuel Santos in response to a favorable article published in a U.S. travel magazine this month. The message appears to be getting through: The country logged 2.9 million foreign visitors last year, a 57 percent increase from 2012.

In the mountains of Medellín, Roberto Escobar, Pablo's brother, caters to tourists seeking a different type of thrill. He leads tours that show off memorabilia including cars riddled with bullet holes, a jet ski the kingpin owned, and the table where the capo had his last meal, which is recounted in detail, down to a spilled glass of wine. *Narcos* fans will catch references to events depicted in the series. The tour's organizers say some 80 to 100 people a day pay \$30 for the experience. "People want to know the real stories," says Roberto during an afternoon tour. "We have the stories."

Medellín's mayor, Federico Gutiérrez, has been critical of those who make their living hawking the city's lurid past and has proposed razing one of the remaining Escobar sites to turn the area into a memorial park for victims of the violence. "It's a booming business for many," he said in a local radio interview. "For any person that wants to come to Medellín and wants to know the real history of drug trafficking, what happened with Pablo Escobar, what we did, OK, come. But we're going to tell the story ourselves, as a city."

Valderrama says the museum she oversees wants to devote more space to victims' stories during the worst of the drug violence, from the 1970s through the 1990s. "What happened here is a tragedy, and the idea is for people not to leave thinking that Pablo Escobar is this mythical character they see in TV series, that they understand that what happened here was almost a genocide," she says.

Balakjian, the tourist from London, says that as he spent more time in Colombia he began to feel a bit uncomfortable about having taken part in an activity that made light of a dark moment in the country's history.

Comprehension

1 - What events put the light on Colombia?

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2 - Define the different reactions of the locals.

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3 - Find 3 touristic activities related to Pablo Escobar in the text.

1.
2.
3.

4 - Pick out elements about the security in this country nowadays.

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5 - Name 3 stereotypes about Colombia stated in this article.

1.
2.
3.