

# GOOD TIMES IN MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA

"NOTHING HAPPENS UNLESS FIRST A DREAM." - CARL SANDBURG.

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## **Did you know this about Colombia?**

"Paradox" is the term most often applied to Colombia.

Seldom does it appear in newspapers that Colombia is the leading supplier of flowers to the United States, that it is a pioneer in private philanthropy throughout Latin America, and that, despite the problems, it remains highly attractive for oil and gas exploration. Granted, such accomplishments do not easily lend themselves to appealing headlines. But they are critical to come to an honest picture of a country endowed with considerable advantages, struggling to pursue a productive course.

Colombia is South America's oldest democracy.

Colombia has a proud tradition of civilian, constitutional government. During the 20th century, all presidents were elected democratically. The only exception was a military regime during the 1953-1957 period. While many Latin American countries suffered dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, Colombia remained a solid bastion of democracy in the continent.

Colombia is the only major Latin American country that did not have to renegotiate its debt in the 1980s.

Colombia is among the few Latin American countries with a sound history of external debt management. It has never defaulted on its international financial responsibilities. The latest available debt indicators from the Inter-American Development Bank reveal a continuation of this trend. From 1991-1998, Colombia's foreign debt as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product declined, comparing favorably to the Latin American average.

Colombia's capital city, Bogota, is safer and more modern than ever.

Bogotá has one of the lowest homicide rates of major cities in the Western Hemisphere. In 2000, the homicide rate fell by some 35 %, largely due to innovative reforms in urban security. The city government has also undertaken a multi-billion capital improvement program, "refurbishing 877 parks, paving 117 miles of roads, introducing sewage treatment to 415 neighborhoods and building 22 schools and 21 libraries." Transmilenio, Bogota's new transportation system, has effectively reduced

the average commute from one hour to 20 minutes.

Colombia remains highly attractive for oil and gas exploration. Colombia features low commercial risk, experienced local personnel, and sound infrastructure for hydrocarbon transportation. The sector has significantly improved during the past two decades; the country's oil production grew from 126 kilo barrels a day in 1980 to more than 800 in 1999. Since 2000, Colombia has signed 49 contracts for exploration with the biggest petroleum companies in the world, including Occidental, British Petroleum, Chevron, Total, Texaco, and Arco.

Colombia's internet access extends to rural and low-income communities. High internet accessibility is due in part to the fact that Colombia maintains the third-highest telephone density in Latin America, ahead of Brazil and Mexico. A variety of important governmental efforts to expand e-commerce opportunities, including a bilateral initiative launched with the United States in May 2000, have further aided growth. From 1999-2000, the number of internet users rose 28%, and the number of computers owned by Colombians jumped more than 20%. In 2001, internet traffic has grown by 116%.

Colombia's fight against smuggling has proven effective. The Colombian government has introduced a unique mechanism to control smuggling through agreements with private industries. According to government figures, while in 1998 some 87% of cigarettes sold in Colombia were smuggled into the country, in 2001, more than 90% had a legal origin, a dramatic, positive reversal. During the same period, legal sales in the appliance sector went from 40 to 82%.

Colombia is the number-two flower exporter in the world (after the Netherlands), and the number-one supplier to the United States.

Colombia exports more than 50 types of flowers including roses, carnations, pompoms, chrysantemums, gypsophila, and astromeria. The country also contains the largest variety of orchids in the world, with some 3500 types. In 2000, roses were the leading export product, with sales of US \$176 million. Exports to North America, the main market of Colombian flowers, rose to US \$488.2 million last year, representing nearly 85% of the country's total flower exports.

Colombia has a renowned medical and scientific community. Colombia boasts Barraquer, an internationally recognized eye clinic where an innovative laser technology for surgical purposes was devised. It draws patients from throughout the Andean region and Caribbean basin. There are also many outstanding Colombian doctors; three especially stand out. Dr. Manuel Patarroyo developed the only successful malaria vaccine and donated it to the World Health Organization. Dr. Rodolfo Llinas is recognized as one of the world's top researchers of the human brain. And Dr. Andres Jaramillo Botero, an expert in nanotechnology, is regarded as one of the most distinguished scientists of the 20th century.

Colombia produces world-class cultural leaders.

Nobel prize-winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez holds the world record for sales of any single novel. One Hundred Years of Solitude has sold 32 million copies and has been translated into more than two dozen languages. The works of painter and sculptor Fernando Botero have been exhibited in the most prestigious galleries in the world; his paintings have sold for over US \$1 million. Singer Carlos Vives has become recognized for his interpretation of a local music style known as vallenato, breaking national record sales (more than 2.5 million sold). Shakira, who won a Grammy in 2001 for the Best Latin Pop Album, has sold more than 10 million albums worldwide.

Nearly 60,000 private, non-profit organizations are registered in Colombia, reflecting a vibrant civil society.

These organizations include cooperatives, indigenous organizations, family and neighborhood associations, cultural groups, private foundations, and research centers. The proliferation of such organizations highlights Colombia's history of decentralization, unique in Latin America. The organizations have established strong ties with the Colombian businesses to finance their activities. Colombian philanthropic organizations, especially in the city of Cali, have been pioneers in Latin America in supporting a wide array of development activities.

Colombia has the second-richest biodiversity in the world after Brazil.

Colombia has over 1800 species of birds alone. This is partly due to Colombia's blend of terrains and climates, with more than a thousand miles of coastline as well as three majestic mountain ranges.

Colombia's publishing houses are the engine of book production and exporting in Latin America.

Colombia is also the region's leading exporter of books. Carvajal S.A., a Cali-based group, manages one of the largest editorials in Latin America, one that is present in fifteen Spanish-speaking countries and the United States. It specializes in school textbooks, managerial, self-help, literature, and children's books, as well as reference materials such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. In addition, the library run by the Central Bank in Bogota lends more books than any other in Latin America.

In 2000, Colombia had the highest-ranking soap opera in the world.

"Betty la Fea" (Betty the Ugly), an unusual heroine in her lack of aesthetic attributes, had over 18 million Colombians glued to the television each night. The show appeared in 15 Western countries, gathering 80 million viewers in Latin America and the United States.

Does this look familiar?

UGLY BETTY - NEWS AND UPDATES

POSTED BY MEDELLIN TRAVELER AT 3:42 PM

