

As I walked alone through the vibrant streets of Medellin, Colombia, I couldn't help but marvel at the city's unlikely journey from being the world's most notorious and dangerous city to a bustling backpacker mecca. The legacy of Pablo Escobar, once a looming shadow over the city, now felt like a distant nightmare. As I further explored the buzzing city, I witnessed firsthand how Medellin changed its narrative from one of violence and destruction to one of excitement and life, pulling in backpackers and digital nomads from around the world.

Engaging with locals, I learned of their past horrors and witnessed their culture shock at the sudden influx of "gringos" in their once tumultuous city. In only 20 years, Medellin has reinvented itself as a hub for explorers like myself seeking cultural immersion and adventure at a wildly affordable cost. Most of my travel in the city was on the back of a moped, booked with InDrive, where drivers and riders can negotiate the cash price of trips. All my interactions on the app and with the drivers were safe, reliable, cheap, and incredibly fun. From interactions like this, it became obvious how the city had been carefully curated to fulfill the travel fantasies of solo female travelers from around the world.

# Gringolandia: The Transformation of Medellin

## A MONTH SOLO-BACKPACKING IN COLOMBIA

Considered the most dangerous neighborhood in the entire world up through the 1990s, Comuna 13's drastic transformation resonated deeply with me; what was once a place of horror and death has been recently reborn as a symbol of urban renewal, often showcased through colorful graffiti adorning the walls and never-ending stairs. Despite criticisms of becoming too much of a tourist trap, this shift underscored a broader change in Medellin, where tourism and travel have become vital. Even though the city is now brimming with life and seemingly-eternal sunshine, cocaine is still the #1 driver of its economy, and the police force is primarily controlled by the crime syndicates who benefit from tourists like me feeling safe in their city. Authorities have gone to great lengths to ensure safety, especially in El Poblado, which has affectionately been dubbed "GringoLandia," by the locals. There, the Tourist Police presence on every corner makes travelers feel secure as they party until the sun comes up. It's a fascinating juxtaposition: the high-class tourist areas in the valley versus the poorer neighborhoods crammed into the mountainside. The city's public transportation system, including its metro and innovative cable cars, offered unique perspectives of these dilapidated houses stacked on top of one another. From participating in walking tours led by locals who lived through Escobar's reign to embarking on backpacker activities hosted by hostels and even paragliding over the city, I was able to learn and explore every day.

At my hostels, I was stepping into a perfect travel experience, far beyond a mere bunk bed for the night. These hostels felt like a living, breathing backpacker community with bars, infinity pools, lounges, kitchens, daily social events, and more. Their rooftop parties overlooking the twinkling cityscape and immersive local interactions made me feel so alive. But underneath the surface of Medellin's bustling tourist attractions and vibrant nightlife lies a more clandestine reality, one that continues to shape its economic foundation. Despite its remarkable transformation, darker parts remain, silently controlling aspects of the economy unnoticed by casual explorers. While less visible, this aspect of Medellin's economy remains significant, intricately woven into the fabric of the city's positive resurgence. Navigating the streets, engaging with locals, and immersing myself in the culture, I could not ignore the subtle reminders of this parallel economy. I could see how the Colombian drug trade could be controversial: on the one hand, it's caused violence, death, and destruction, not to mention the dangers of cocaine itself. On the other hand, much of the country's economy is propped up by the substance, and many marginalized communities benefit from the profits of the trade.

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These harsher realities operate behind the scenes, hidden away from the bright-eyed tourists in the city's efforts to project safety and stability. This realization of a cultural revival added a layer of depth to my understanding of the city, emphasizing the resilience of its people and the challenges they still face in rewriting their narrative. There is a truly unmatched sense of pride from the people of Medellin. The city's strategy of creating an inviting atmosphere for adventurers seeking the unique and uncharted before transitioning to a destination for more traditional vacationers is smart, as backpackers often pave the way for more risk-averse travelers who wait for the next viral travel video on social media. This approach not only preserves the city's authentic charm but also strategically positions it on the global tourism map. The city of eternal spring, Medellin's narrative is no longer just about overcoming a dark past, but about embracing a future where every corner, every cable car ride, and every rooftop party tells a story of transformation and hope. Medellin, with its enthusiastic spirit and welcoming locals, is not just a place to visit; it has become a significant chapter in my own story of discovery and learning the true meaning of resilience.