

Colombia: Unlivable but Happy. Fool's Paradise?

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This mostly theory and review article attempts to start resolving the apparent contradiction between happy Colombians despite unlivable Colombia. Colombia is one of the several very happiest countries, and at the same time apparently unlivable—by Western standards—Colombia's poor, corrupt, dangerous, and roads and ports are bad, too. But objective livability of a society measured in terms of money/consumption/infrastructure misses two points: 1) already very basic commodities are good enough to satisfy human needs and produce wellbeing; 2) non-commodities such as personal freedom and social connection not only matter, but also are hampered by excessive pursuit of commodities. For instance, impeccable organization and physical infrastructure such as that in Singapore or richest parts of the US not only is unnecessary and insufficient for livability and happiness, but it may actually decrease them by: 1) having to focus on what's unimportant and overwork, and 2) by making environment and interaction inhuman, sanitized, hospital/airport-like. This paper argues that the world has much to learn from Colombia—Colombia is a real paradise. Yet another possibility that we cannot fully rule out is that ignorance is a bliss—Colombia is a fool's paradise. We discuss alternative explanations and provide directions for future research.

LIFE SATISFACTION, HAPPINESS, SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING, QUALITY OF LIFE, LIVABILITY, BEST PLACES TO LIVE, COLOMBIA, ALIENATION, DEGROWTH

Happy Colombia

Colombia is one of a handful of the happiest countries—both World Values Surveys and World Database of Happiness¹ rank it top 3 in table 1. Colombia's happiness typically ranges between 8 and 8.5 on 1-10 scale. Colombia is outstanding at achieving very high happiness at low economic development.

Colombia is happier than all other Latin countries in table 1 and about as happy as Mexico, but Colombia is significantly poorer than Mexico, at least 25% poorer either in nominal or PPP terms.²

Table 1: 10 happiest countries in the world. Data from World Database of Happiness (WDH) 2010-2019 out of 160 countries at worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/rank-reports/satisfaction-with-life; and World Values Surveys (WVS) 2005-2022 [waves 5-7] out of 88 countries at worldvaluessurvey.org.

WDH			WVS		
rank	country	happiness (1-10)	rank	country	happiness (1-10)
1	Denmark	8.2	1	Puerto Rico	8.4
2	Mexico	8.1	2	Mexico	8.3
3	Colombia	8.1	3	Colombia	8.3
4	Switzerland	8	4	Qatar	8.0
5	Finland	8	5	Norway	7.9
6	Iceland	8	6	Nicaragua	7.9
7	Costa Rica	7.9	7	Tajikistan	7.9
8	Norway	7.9	8	Switzerland	7.9
9	Canada	7.9	9	Uzbekistan	7.9
10	Qatar	7.8	10	Ecuador	7.8

¹We do not use Gallup data because Gallup data are not meant for research but for commerce—Gallup charges \$30,000 (per year) for data access (authors' inquiry). Clearly happiness industry (Davies 2015), not happiness research. In general, private corporations are often making fortune from tax dollars and students tuition—scholars should resist corporatization of academia (Mills 2012a, Cox 2013, Mills 2012b, Catropa and Andrews 2020, Schmidlin 2015), and corporatization of happiness research (Davies 2015). We advocate use of freely available World Values Survey (WVS) at worldvaluessurvey.org.

²See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>.

Unlivable Colombia

In sharp contrast to supreme Colombian happiness, Colombia is not livable or has low quality of life (QOL), as measured with objective indicators in table 2.³

Table 2: Livability/Quality Of Life (QOL): objective indicators.

Indicator	Value	Source
2019 poverty (national benchmark)	42%	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=CO
2011 median daily income/cap PPP USD	\$7	https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/23/seven-in-ten-people-globally-live-on-10-or-less-per-day/
2019 percent on <\$5.5/day	30%	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.UMIC?locations=CO
2017 R/P 10%	40	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.10TH.10
2020 unemployment rate	15%	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=CO
2020 freedom rank	96/210	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores
2021 corruption rank	87/180	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/color
2020 political stability, no violence/terrorism pctile	20th	https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports
2020 rule of law pctile	34th	https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports
2021 working conditions decile	bottom decile	https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2021/countries/color
2018 quality of roads rank	110/137	https://reports.weforum.org/pdf/gci-2017-2018-scorecard/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Scorecard_EOSQ057.pdf

Some of the objective indicators of quality of life from table 2 are unthinkably grim: About a third of Colombians live on less than \$5.50 a day (2019). Poverty (national benchmark) is at 42%—the whole nation has a higher poverty rate than one of the poorest cities in the US, Camden NJ, at 36% (also national benchmark, census.gov/quickfacts/camdennewjersey). Median daily PPP per capita income in 2011 was at \$7 (the US was at \$56). In terms of working conditions, Colombia is in the bottom decile: there are murders and impunity, union-busting and dismissals. R/P 10% is the ratio of the average income of the richest 10% to the poorest 10%—Colombia ranks 3rd out of 70 at a whooping 40—top decile of Colombians makes on average 40x the average of the poorest decile—even greater disparity than in the unequal US at 30. Unemployment rate is at 15%, with informal labor at about 50% of the workforce (Hurtado 2016).

All of that—precarious labor, poverty, and inequality should lead to unhappiness. Inequality in Latin America was found to have negative effects on happiness as it signals persistent unfairness (Graham and Felton 2006)—unfairness seems to be more important than inequality (Starmans et al. 2017). Inequality is a stark feature of Colombian life, and it is inequality that has sparked recent mass protests.

Colombia is still being haunted by violence and conflict, much of which is rural (Turkewitz (2021), hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/colombia). Colombia is less stable and more violent than 80 percent of the countries—in table 2 metric “political stability and absence of violence and terrorism” is only at 20th percentile. Colombia is only partly free, ranked at 96/210, quite corrupt at 87/180, and Rule of Law is problematic—below about 2/3 of countries.

In terms of quality of roads Colombia ranks 110/137—part of the problem is mountains, yet, for example, equally mountainous Ecuador has succeeded in road building. Transport is the blood of the society (e.g., De Vos et al. 2013)—roads are a basis for travel, commerce, and trade, especially that Colombia has no rail.

Unlivable but Happy—“Fool’s Paradise”?

It is instructive to start with Veenhoven’s 4 qualities of life (2000) in table 3. Life chances, an outer quality in first cell (livability of environment) should in theory correspond with life results, an inner quality in last cell (satisfaction). That is, a livable place should be happy.

³Colombia scores mediocre or low on all indicators in table 2. Still, there are many other ways to measure QOL. UsNews, for instance, ranks Colombia 68/78. World Economic Forum provides indicators, too—see Supplementary Online Material (SOM).

	outer qualities	inner qualities
life-chances	livability of environment	life-ability of the person
life-results	utility of life	satisfaction

Table 3: Veenhoven's 4 qualities of life 2000

Colombia's low livability/QOL should result in low satisfaction/happiness—it is unexpected for Colombia to be one of the very happiest countries in the world. The goal of this study is to spark the debate and provide directions to explain this massive mismatch or paradox. Colombia scores mediocre or low on most livability/QOL indicators, but tops rankings of satisfaction/happiness. In other words, it appears to be unlivable but happy, a so called “Fool's Paradise,” a place where people are subjectively happy, despite objective misery (Michalos 2014). An intersection of QOL and SWB can be visualized in a 2x2 matrix in table 4—expected outcomes are lo-lo or hi-hi, but there can also be unexpected lo-hi “fool's paradise” or hi-lo “fool's hell.”

	lo livability	hi livability
lo SWB	real hell [deprivation, unhappy poor]	fool's hell [dissonance, unhappy rich]
hi SWB	fool's paradise [adaptation, happy poor]	real paradise [well-being, happy rich]

Table 4: Michalos 2 variable theory: fool's paradise and fool's hell (Michalos 2014). Cummins classification is shown in square brackets (Sirgy 2002, p.61). For other examples of fool's paradise and fool's hell see Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente (2019).

There is a number of theories and explanations for high happiness despite low livability.

Livability Theory

A major and ideally fitting happiness theory, specifically about the link between livability and SWB, is Veenhoven's livability/needs theory (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995, Veenhoven 2014). Humans, like all animals, have needs, as those on the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow [1954] 1987)—the more the needs are satisfied, the more happiness—places or societies that satisfy human needs well are livable or have high QOL:

Societies are systems for meeting human needs, but not all societies do that job equally well. Consequently, people are not equally happy in all societies.

Improvement of the fit between social institutions and human needs will result in greater happiness. (p. 3645 Veenhoven 2014)

The apparent Colombian chasm between livability and happiness may point to the limitations of livability theory. But we argue that, counter-intuitively, the livability theory may mostly hold true because: 1) Mediocre or even moderately poor development (physical and institutional infrastructure) is already good enough to satisfy most basic human needs and make a place livable; 2) Physical and institutional infrastructure mostly serves only first two steps of Maslow's pyramid (physiological and safety).⁴ 3) Higher needs such as personal freedom and social connection that are critically important for livability are rarely properly captured by livability metrics. Given always limited resources and attention, there is an opportunity cost. Excessive pursuit of money or consumption at person level, or economic growth at community or society level sacrifices non-commodities such as personal freedom and social connection notably through overwork and alienation.⁵

A notable human need overlooked by livability/QOL indices is biophilia (Fromm 1964, Wilson 2021), a need for contact with nature—“nature is not a place to visit. It is home” (Gary Snyder). There is a clear tradeoff between economic growth and nature preservation, for instance, the more urbanization, the less natural the human habitat. Or next door in Brazil—the more economic growth, the less Amazon rainforest. Climate change is a critical challenge for human needs as it endangers the very habitat of homo

⁴Human physiological needs are simple and easily satisfied without much economic or institutional development.

⁵As elaborated in later section “Theory of Alienation.”

sapiens (Pachauri et al. 2014), and again, the more economic growth, the worse the environmental degradation (e.g., Klein 2014), indeed a reasonable course of action is to de-grow the economies (Hickel 2020, Kallis 2011), especially the rich and carbon intensive ones such as the US.⁶

Related to biophilia and climate change is biodiversity, which also improves happiness (Adjei and Agyei 2015, Prescott and Logan 2017). Nature is extraordinary in Colombia. Colombia has 2nd largest biodiversity after Brazil, despite being 7x smaller than Brazil. Colombia has just about any type of natural amenities. Exposure to nature (as opposed to cities) is the key ingredient for happiness (Pretty 2012, Tesson 2013, Thoreau 1995 [1854]).

Another human need, and a key to happiness is social connection (Tönnies [1887] 2002, Lane 2000, McMahon 2006, Putnam 2001), and there is plenty of social connection in Colombia. Colombians are extraordinarily social, friendly, outgoing and spontaneous—social gatherings, events and festivals are widespread, frequent and long-lasting. Again, there is a tradeoff, the more focus on money, the longer the work hours, the less social capital.

Freedom is a great human need, perhaps worth dying for.⁷ Colombia scores average on freedom listed earlier as a QOL metric in table 2, but that is one kind of freedom: “freedom from” (negative, objective): be no slave, live in a free country, have no coercion, free from restrictions/impediments; lack of obstacles. But there is another kind of freedom: “freedom to” (positive, subjective): be able to choose, control and direct one’s own life; presence of control. On scale 1-10, world’s average is about 7; the legendary land of the free, the US, scores higher at 7.7, but Colombia scores higher yet at 8 (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2014, 2015). Surely, the US does have many freedoms, but Colombians (and Mexicans, too) actually do feel more free than people in the US. Again, arguably one reason for lower feeling of freedom in the US is too much focus on work, money, and consumption.

Folklore's Theory: Colombia's "Good Energy"

There is an indigenous concept of "Buen Vivir" (Good Living) (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017), similar to Aristotelian "Eudamonia"—both emphasize harmony and community. Buen Vivir is also about environment and food sovereignty, and it arguably contributes to SWB in Colombia, as it does in Ecuador (Guardiola and García-Quero 2014). Notably, Buen Vivir helps to explain an apparent fool’s paradise—economic poverty is relative—it depends on specific way of life. For instance, households that grow their own food and are in an indigenous community depend less on money to be happy (García-Quero and Guardiola 2018). Likewise, kibbutzniks (Morawetz et al. 1977) and Amish (Surowiecki 2005) are able to be happy despite being poor.

The folklore theory, a less known theory, defines happiness in terms of the reflection of broadly held perceptions about life which are rooted in traditions and the culture of a society (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995). For example, if a culture has an optimistic outlook on life regardless of circumstances, future generations will remain positive. Thus, a society may be happy, regardless of the socioeconomic situation, because of cultural influences (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995).

The folklore theory is about national disposition/trait/character. It does appear that Colombians have slow-paced familial/social cheerful/happy disposition, which arguably is conducive for happiness. Colombian happiness does appear very real, however, rather than just being due to cognitive cultural norms, wearing pink glasses.

lina—add here on folklore, culture? esp cite major works? add coauthor specialize in this? Proper treatment of the folklore theory is left for the future research as authors’ knowledge of Colombian culture and heritage is limited—but we discuss below some popular explanations for Colombia’s happiness—future research can test them properly and systematically. We start with authors’ personal observations, anecdotal evidence. In Colombia there is human factor, good energy that we have lost in the West (Freud et al. 1930).

⁶Recommendations about Colombian economic growth and development are beyond the scope of this study, but see some discussion for instance in Rubiano (2022).

⁷As a movie character Scottish warrior William Wallace put it:

Fight and you may die. Run, and you'll live...at least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance—just one chance—to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives but they'll never take our freedom! ([imdb.com/title/tt0112573](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112573))

It arguably does appear that the US (and the West) has given up some humanity to win the economic race. Colombia (and Latin America) gave up less humanity, remained quite human and happy, but lost the economic race and hasn't dominated the world economically. Colombians' attitude and approach to life is spontaneous unbridled joy—as Marcuse and Fromm postulated (Marcuse 2015, Fromm 2013, 2012, 1964, [1941] 1994),⁸ also reminiscent of Nietzsche's ideal of a child—curious, spontaneous, creative, and innocent (Nietzsche 1896). It is present time orientation—not living in the past or worrying about future, happy-go-lucky free spirit without shame or guilt—in sharp contrast to the West, where anxiety and calculating attitude prevail.⁹ The US way of life is unnaturally fast and mostly about money (Easterlin 1973), aka “busyness” (Gershuny 2005, Musk 2018). The US way of life is also full of stress and anxiety even outside of work and money pursuit. Another source of stress and anxiety may be the constant drive to excel in everything, be perfect, and keep up with the Joneses (Frank 2012, Manson 2015)—so well portrayed in “American Beauty” and “Crash” movies.¹⁰

Yet another source of stress and anxiety is quantity and quality of social relationships—in the US, a capitalistic society, social relationships are about business, not about actual meaningful social contact (Horowitz 2022, Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020). As compared to calculating and fake Americans, Colombians are spontaneous, innocent, closer to human nature, and more real. Colombians do not pay much attention to economics and politics. Life is more about family, friends, and fun.

Next, let's move to popular media/popular culture explanations. Two popular media articles seem most informative: Bargent (2016), Wallace (2017a).

According to an Englishman living in Medellin these are the things that make it happy in Colombia (Bargent 2016): putting most importance on family, friends, and fun—bravado and blind optimism may help, too; having less entitlement and appreciating what one has, having joy in small things, e.g., cheap coffee/alcohol are just fine; not worrying and not expecting much (“tranquilo.”)

Bargent (2016) observes: “Colombia violence and cruelty became frighteningly routine”—indeed people can get used to just about anything (Brickman et al. 1978), and again, even though the violence is frequent, it used to be even more prevalent in 80s and 90s—happiness can be produced through relative advantage (Michalos 1985).

Bargent (2016) wonders further that in Colombia emotions change seamlessly and effortlessly between shame and pride, despair and hope, sorrow and happiness—but shouldn't they? Isn't being natural, simple, and easy-going a good thing? As opposed to the US, where one is supposed to pretend to just be perfect, happy, and busy working as in “American Beauty” movie. “Surface acting” (faking emotions that are deemed appropriate) is emotionally draining (Brooks 2022).

Wallace (2017a) offers many illustrative quotes by Colombians and about Colombians:

“Money is nice but it's not the most important thing,” “In general we are a culture that values what you have,” and “We love people and music” “Colombians are innocent. They're curious.” “Colombians have become indifferent to situations of war. In other words, if the problem does not touch me directly, I must feel grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky.” “Colombians have always demonstrated incredible, Herculean and powerful resilience to war, death and to the harsh history of violence and diplomatic failures,” “Colombians feed this resilience through human connections and the communal experience.” “We live for parties, holidays, and fill the void with a fanaticism for sporting events and beauty pageants and entertainment” “The dance frees you. It is a way of expression and feeling. Here the music is carried in the blood, in the veins, in our heart. It's a great passion we carry throughout our lives.”¹¹

⁸Marcuse (2015) contains many valuable insights as per freedom, alienation, and wellbeing—much of which is a critique of Western or especially the US way of life, and much of which seem to materialize in Colombia.

⁹But see Banfield (1967, 1974)—it could be also culture of poverty that results in poor development. Yet, not caring too much can be actually what is needed for much of a society in the West—see wonderfully refreshing Manson (2015).

¹⁰Excellence is pervasive, e.g., Plano TX, has on its official logo “City Of Excellence.” But excellence or perfection is not human, on the contrary, to err is human. Pursuit of perfection/excellence generates arms race and constantly raises the bar, creating even more stress and anxiety in a vicious cycle, and ultimately by definition creates mass failure—humans by definition are not perfect, and there can only be one or a handful of winners in any race (Frank 2012, Manson 2015). In addition to stress and anxiety, shame and guilt are arguably created as well.

¹¹Wallace (2017a) further explains: “Colombian salsa, as opposed to other forms, is denoted by faster syncopations that match the people's natural energy. It's an egalitarian genre, accessible to everyone, and it seems to make the entire country happy. But is it a different experience than in other countries, like, say, with Brazilians and samba?” “I think there are several differences [...] Our dance is much more sociable. It's necessary to dance salsa as a couple or in a group. There is a more direct connection. For these reasons, it's been gaining importance in the world.” “Salsa is a refresher of human dignity. It overshadows inequity and discontent with sharp rhythms and the madness of love. It closes social distances because it requires people to embrace each other in a moment

Davies (2022) adds few happy Colombian traits: warm and polite, deeply affectionate among friends, and kind to strangers; loves to party, reveres, and adores their family, and is so enthusiastic about life. Moreno (2013) lists some intriguing hypotheses as to happiness predictors that could be used in the future research: biodiversity, climate diversity, plenty of festivals/holidays, healthy lifestyle and food, dancing.

Theory of Alienation

"Alienation is the transformation of people's own labor into a power which rules them" (marxists.org/subject/alienation). Alienation means separation of a person from the conditions of meaningful agency—a typical situation is when a person does not own means of production—such a person is only an appendage of a machine (Horowitz 2022). The overall alienation consists of alienation from: the product of labour, the activity of labour, one's own specific humanity, others/society. For elaboration see Horowitz (2022) and marxists.org/subject/alienation.

Colombians appear to be full of agency in contrast to alienated Americans. For instance, in Colombia, pull over from the road and right there on a roadside you get a friendly personal cup of coffee. In the US, you can go to Starbucks that feels like hospital or airport—robotic and inhuman.¹² Starbucks workers (not to mention McDonald's and other fast foods) do seem to be alienated both from the product and the activity—they have no freedom, autonomy or latitude over the product and almost none over labor (there are strict procedures that must be followed).

Same holds for other chains that dominate the US, and could be extended to other businesses, delivery for instance. US Amazon drivers have cameras and motion detectors in a truck, and to meet the quota sometimes they have to pee in the bottle (Moyer 2022). Similarly in warehouses, workers are wearing a bracelet with GPS, and to meet the quota sometimes have to restore to painkillers that are freely available from dispensaries throughout the warehouse (Streifeld and Kantor 2015, Guendelsberger 2019). What else could be a better example of loss of humanity or de-humanization than a human wearing a bracelet with GPS eating painkillers and working alongside robots in a giant warehouse?¹³ Of course, not all workers suffer in such dire conditions, but this is arguably the trend. If innovative Amazon does it, others are likely to follow. In Colombia, on the contrary, much of delivery is informal—often a guy on a motorcycle who has plenty of autonomy and freedom over execution of his job. In fact, about half of the Colombian economy is informal—informal labor is at about 50% or more of the workforce (cited in Hurtado 2016).¹⁴

And there are two other types of alienation: from oneself and society—if one performs highly specialized task in a repetitive fashion for long hours (much of the US workforce), one becomes alienated from herself and the society. This can be easily observed after working hours—the US workers are like ghosts without much life in them and without much interaction (Putnam 2001, Duany et al. 2001). Colombians, on the other hand, are not alienated—their life is about family, friends, and fun, not about money—less money orientation, less alienation (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020).

As per livability theory (Veenhoven 2014), society is a system to satisfy human needs, but there are multiple serious discontents of the Western society and many human needs are suppressed and not satisfied (Freud et al. 1930). Notably highly capitalistic societies, such as the US, serve to satisfy the capitalists, rather than the working people (Marx [1867] 2010).¹⁵

¹²If you are from a developed country, you probably protest the proposition and think that Starbucks is friendlier, warmer, cozier, etc, than a hospital. Then you should go to a developing country, non-tourist destination (no Cartagena, no Cancun) and hang out with locals for several months.

¹³Movie fiction is becoming reality—"Elysium" (imdb.com/title/tt1535108)

¹⁴Colombia has a high prevalence of informal work above 50% and workers in informal sector are less happy (Hurtado et al. 2017). This would contradict alienation hypothesis, but it doesn't take into account confounders such as lower pay, lack of benefits, etc.

¹⁵To be fair, so far alternatives to capitalism such as communism did have failed spectacularly as in Soviet Union and continue to fail in Venezuela and elsewhere. But what about fully automated luxury communism (Bastani 2019)? Furthermore, to be fair, there are many great things about the West and especially the US: vibrant international melting pot—Colombia may be a microcosm of Latin America, but US may be a microcosm of the World; relative lack of (crude) corruption, working independent courts, un-corrupt law enforcement, abundance of goods and services (not that need that much for livability), and arguably the biggest advantage: the highest wages in the world. But arguably if you do not make a lot of money, the US is not the best place to be—alienation is not worth little money.

Singapore: Fool's Hell?

An useful counterexample to Colombia's "fool's paradise" is a "fool's hell"—a place that has high objective quality of life or livability, but low subjective wellbeing or life satisfaction.

Singapore, Switzerland of Asia, is impeccably clean, extremely stable/predictable/disciplined and safe (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022). Singapore, by many standards, is one of the best, if not the best place in the world. It has world's 3rd highest (after Qatar and Luxembourg) Gross Domestic Product per Capita Purchasing Power Parity adjusted (IMF 2017). It has also 3rd highest (after Monaco and Japan) life expectancy (Central Intelligence Agency 2017), 2nd highest economic freedom (Heritage 2017). Singaporean children score highest on educational tests (Coughlan 2017), it is making greatest progress in health (Fullman et al. 2017), has the world's fastest internet (McSpadden 2015), and 2nd best roads (World Economic Forum 2017). It even has world's strongest passport (Chandran 2017). In short, one could say that Singapore is one of most livable places in the world, if not the very most livable in the world. Singapore's life satisfaction rank is 68/160 (WDH). Again, Colombia is 3/160.

Being impeccably clean, extremely disciplined and safe can hamper positive freedom (Singapore scores 7 v Colombia's 8 in WVS) and ultimately happiness. For instance, no smoking in Singapore—but cigars help a great deal in struggle of life (Freud).¹⁶ No marijuana, no gum chewing, and a list of prohibitions continues (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022).

the US: Fool's Hell?

The US, the world-renowned "best country in the world," home to the American dream, notably the very richest country in the world (excluding tiny oil producing countries such as Norway), ranks 46/160 in WDH—the "best country in the world" doesn't even make it to the top happiness quartile. This sounds like fool's hell, the opposite of Colombian mismatch of QOL and SWB. Except that, also as in Colombia's case, there is arguably better match between QOL and SWB than expected, because there are non-commodity components such as personal freedom and social connection that need to be taken into account. Colombia is actually quite livable and so it is happy, and the US actually is not that livable, and hence not that happy.

One would imagine that the US must have top income mobility in the world or surely somewhere near the top, it is after all the country of American Dream where hard work results in success better than elsewhere. But many other countries have actually "more realistic dreams" than the US—for instance, it is easier to make it in Norway, Denmark, or Finland (Corak 2004, 2011, 2013, Economist 2013, 2012b,a). In terms of mobility, the US is somewhat like a Fool's Paradise—people and especially immigrants think it is a paradise—you work hard, and you go to the top, but it is actually easier in other countries.

In the US, pursuit of money and pursuit of happiness are about the same thing (Easterlin 1973). But we know that a lot of money does not buy much happiness, and if anything, excessive pursuit of it, such as that in the US, may actually decrease happiness (Kasser 2016, Dittmar et al. 2014, Brown and Kasser 2005, Kasser 2003, Schmuck et al. 2000, Kasser and Ryan 1993, Leonard 2010). Arguably the major culprit is consumerism—in the US one can make a good living, make good salary, the problem is people spend it on stuff they don't need and end up on the hamster wheel.

Discussion and Conclusion

Colombia appears to be a striking paradox in the social indicators field. Colombia scores poor or mediocre on objective quality of life indicators, but it is an extremely happy country. Is Colombia "unlivable" but "happy," a so called "fool's paradise"? Arguably not.

¹⁶ "Smoking is one of the greatest and cheapest enjoyments in life, and if you decide in advance not to smoke, I can only feel sorry for you," "[Cigars have] served me for precisely fifty years as protection and a weapon in the combat of life ... I owe to the cigar a great intensification of my capacity to work and a facilitation of my self-control." Per Freud see <https://www.freud.org.uk/2020/04/22/freud-and-his-cigars/> and Elkin (1994). Of course, as with everything, moderation should be exercised, for instance, smoking more than 2 cigars a day increases probability of health problems much more than smoking less than 2 cigars per day, and while some studies find no health effects of smoking less than 2 cigars per day, some studies do find negative effects (e.g., Chang et al. 2015).

Colombia is a genuinely wonderful deeply familial/social place as many locals and travelers would attest (e.g., Roos 2019, Wallace 2017b, Davies 2022). Colombians don't seem to be weighted down by civilization and its discontents (Freud et al. 1930), or ghosts of the past (Pile 2005b,a, Pile et al. 1999).

The world has much to learn from Colombia how to be happy.¹⁷ This paper argues that Colombia is one of the very best countries to visit, and it may even be one of best places to live.

The conclusion is that Colombia is not only one of the happiest countries, but also arguably quite livable. Surely many QOL metrics point to Colombia's real and serious problems, notably poverty and inequality, but at the same time Colombians enjoy great positive freedom, and social connection.

In sharp contrast to Colombia—there is the great American alienation—a key point is that Americans don't even seem to realize at all, don't give it the slightest thought and don't question the status quo and current way of life—until perhaps when it's too late and one is on a deathbed wishing to have been less alienated (Ware 2012)—indeed travel to a place like Colombia may be necessary to open one's eyes. For instance, it is clear from figure 1 that Philadelphia is built for big business and Cali is built for people.¹⁸

Figure 1: Getting out of the city's main transportation hub. (Zoom in to see the details.)

(a) Philadelphia 30th st station



(b) Cali's terminal de transporte



Colombia is mostly a real paradise, not fool's paradise—the point is that in the West, and especially in the US, materialism and consumerism are so extremely rampant and widespread that they are not even noticed (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020, Ware 2012)—equating happiness with money is a norm (Easterlin 1973). So then it is unthinkable that not a wealthy country such as Colombia can be happy. For instance, Graham and Pettinato (2002) and Graham (2012) wonder about paradox of happy peasants v frustrated millionaires—but is it that unexpected? Graham argues adaptation—the poor have adapted to their miserable lot and are happy with little they have. But so do the rich adapt: “the more one has the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs” (Durkheim [1895] 1950), or “wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become; and the same is true of fame” (Schopenhauer).¹⁹

There is plenty of theory why a peasant would be happy (notably contact with nature) and there is empirical evidence, too (e.g.,

¹⁷Note that the arguments and results presented here likely generalize to some degree to other Latin countries, perhaps especially the Caribbean—there may be “Caribbean energy.” Ecuador’s energy, for instance, seems more flat.

¹⁸Figure 1 contrasts Cali main public transit station with Philadelphia main public transit station. In Cali it is much easier to sit, buy food or catch a local bus. It is getting worse in Colombia, however—notably the urban landscape is getting littered with commercial centers “centro comercial” (Western-like malls). Villages are still spared.

¹⁹Still, adaptation (Brickman et al. 1978) can help explain at least a part of the Colombian paradox of high subjective wellbeing despite objective problems such as poverty and crime—humans are able to adapt to just about anything (Brickman et al. 1978). Perhaps, Colombians have adapted, at least to some degree, to poverty, inequality, and even violence having suffered through recent civil war and breakdown of the state—now that things are better than they used to be just few decades ago, Colombians are making best out of the conditions. In other words, the sources of Colombian happiness may be resilience, positive outlook, ability to make out most of little.

Miñarro et al. 2021). There is actually less theory arguing that a millionaire would be happy—only neoclassical economic theory would predict that only money matters and always the more the better (Rayo and Becker 2007, Autor 2010).

The reasoning is also that there must be something wrong with happiness measure (e.g., Deaton 2013, Stevenson and Wolfers 2013, 2009, Glaeser et al. 2014, 2016), or with Colombians (fool's paradise). It simply seems wrong that with little money there may be great happiness. But again, we actually do know that a lot of money is neither necessary nor sufficient for happiness, and indeed excessive pursuit of money, such as that prevalent in the US, may kill happiness.

Only apparently great happiness is somehow possible in unlivable conditions. Table 2 points to unlivable conditions, problems in terms of metrics that are mostly economic, some legal/institutional, and physical infrastructure. But these things are not the only things that matter—there are other things that matter for human flourishing or happiness. Despite all the problems with poverty, roads, corruption, etc, as enumerated in table 2, Colombia arguably is a quite livable place.²⁰ And, again, in fact the more focus on money, the less human friendly the place is. Colombians have a wonderful, joyful, stress-less, and spontaneous way of life, and they feel free and are socially connected.

Still, the proposition of “fool’s paradise” in Colombia may have some merit. The survey data does show that Colombians living in Colombia and making Colombian salary are happy. But would they still be happy if they knew life, salary, and opportunities in the West, say in the US. Would they stay in Colombia if they could easily move? Is ignorance a bliss? Is it paradise only because people don’t know any better?

The concept of “fool’s paradise” is related to the concept of “ignorance is a bliss,” and there may be a grain of truth there.²¹ Colombians, especially those in poor and isolated areas, may not know about good/comfortable life, may not realize the possibilities and opportunities in the West (or any rich area such as Singapore). For instance, inhabitants of poor municipalities in the Choco are happy to know only that environment in which they were born and raised, but when they know and live in other municipalities with greater socio-economic development their demands and expectations increase (Muñoz-Cardona 2018). Many poor may be relatively segregated and isolated into their neighborhoods, not knowing better, and thus being satisfied with little what they have. Similarly, poor women in rural China were happy, and only became unhappy once they became exposed to higher standard of living (Rosenthal 1999).

lina—is that accurate? add/change/elaborate? Furthermore, resilience may be reinforcing fool’s paradise. Curiously, Martínez and Short (2020) reports that in Cali residents in the poorest districts were satisfied with their lives, and speculates that it may be so due to the high resilience of this population being affected by crime, poor health, and insufficient provision of public goods. It may be similar at country level, Colombia was ravaged by largest civil conflict in Latin America and drug-trafficking related violence in 80s and 90s (Martínez and Short 2020), and now while still poor and unsafe as compared to the West, it is much better than 30-50 years ago, and the terror it went through might have made it resilient.

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²⁰As long as the problems are not extreme, and in Colombia they sometimes are. For instance, mediocre or relatively poor road condition does not hamper human flourishing much, but extremely bad condition such as falling bridge does create great unhappiness. Same with poverty—one can live happily on very little, indeed be poor by western standards, without hot water, without car, etc, but abject poverty such as malnutrition does create great unhappiness. There is considerable abject poverty in Colombia, and no amount of nature, festivals, or cheerfulness can help with it.

²¹Likewise, perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia—see SOM for discussion.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

Affective v Cognitive; Hedonia v Eudamonia

"It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question." John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (1863)

Overall Subjective WellBeing (SWB) can be broken down into components. Notably, there is affective happiness (feel happy) v cognitive life satisfaction (perceive/evaluate life as satisfying).

The two would overlap/correlate moderately but they are conceptually different—e.g., I am happy at the moment because I see blue sky and eat a tasty burger, but I am dissatisfied with my life because I have no friends, no money, and bad health. Or I can be satisfied with my life as a whole because I have many friends, excellent health, and great job, but I am unhappy now because the weather is bad and my lunch is not tasting good.

Likewise, a typical Scandinavian, say from Iceland, looks grumpy, cold, unfriendly, and rather sad, doesn't talk much, doesn't smile, yet Scandinavians consistently report very high life satisfaction. Latinos report quite high life satisfaction, and are extremely happy: warm, cheerful, friendly.

Another notable distinction is hedonia: more joy and fun than pain and misery (Bentham) v eudamonia: good life, realizing one's potential, becoming who you are (Aristotle, Nietzsche). Perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia. For discussion see Diener (2009), Weijers (2011), Weijers and Jarden (2013), McMahon (2006), Ryff (2014).

Happiness v Life Satisfaction

Colombia is one of the happiest countries in the world, or indeed the happiest (Roos 2019). Colombia scores in top decile in terms of life satisfaction (Scandinavia often tops the rankings). Yet in terms of emotions and daily life experience: smiling and laughter, respect, enjoyment, worry, sadness and anger: positive daily experiences and emotions, the top countries are: Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Of the 10 countries that rank highest on positive experiences, 7 are Latin American (Roos 2019). Colombians seem to have warm, welcoming, and unshakable spirit; and they appear resilient—grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky, and even innocent (Wallace 2017b).

Purchasing Power in Colombia Not That Different From The West

lina—is 1300 a min wage? and does this sec make sense? For all of the US economic might, Purchasing Power is not that different—on a minimum wage in Colombia of 1,300 pesos, can rent a studio for 400; and can have a very good meal: soup, meat with starch and salad and juice for 7.

In the US, minimum wage comes out to about the same number but in US dollars: \$1,300. But in the US probably cannot rent a studio for \$400, only a room; and definitely cannot have a good meal at a restaurant for \$7. Housing is the main expense for most people, and food is a critical commodity.

Still, many things are relatively cheaper in the US, for instance a gallon of gas is about \$3; in Colombia it is about 10 pesos. And while restaurant food in the US is expensive and unhealthy, it is possible to buy cheap basic and healthy food at a store.

But the difference in purchasing power is not very large for many commodities and services, which is surprising for all the rhetoric about the US as the best country in the world, and the richest country.

Existing Limited Research

a small subsection where list existing research on swb in col-lina-any other?

There is economic research focusing on SWB and inequality in Latin America (Graham and Felton 2006) and Colombia specifically (Burger et al. 2021), but it doesn't address livability-happiness paradox.

The top 1% of the income distribution accounts for over 20% of total income in 2010—the rich Colombians are mostly rentiers and capital owners. (Alvaredo and Londoño Vélez 2013) Yet, regardless of the income level, Colombians are optimistic about their mobility (Londoño Vélez 2011).

Adaptation is strong in Latin America, for instance poor people such as peasants can be happy because of adaptation; crime and corruption decrease happiness, but less so when they are more prevalent—again people adapt (Graham 2009).

Then there is a useful volume on happiness in Latin America: “Handbook of Happiness Research in Latin America” making two relevant points about SWB in Colombia. In the poorest income quintile life satisfaction was above 8 on a 10-point scale (Hurtado 2016). Family is the most important relational good, main social support—family is the meaning of life—the end that justifies efforts (Velásquez 2016).

In conclusion—there is still very little research on happiness in Colombia, and the exiting research is rather indirect and tangential only to our topic, and hence, we also included some anecdotal evidence to explain high happiness amidst low livability.

A look over time

First we have observed a paradox across space (v other countries) of happiness amongst un-livability. Another paradox is within Colombia and over time. There is Easterlin’s Paradox—PCGDP went up 50% but SWB remained flat.

We use GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$) in thousands <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?locations=CO>— Colombian GDP went up by 50% over 1997–2018. Colombians happiness and feeling of freedom are among the highest in the world, but they did not change over 1997–2018. In Colombia, GDP has no relationship with SWB, i.e., the Easterlin Paradox holds.

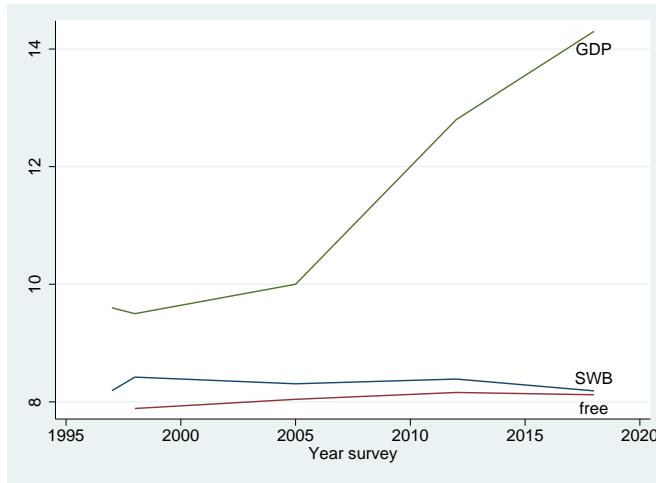


Figure 2: Easterlin’s Paradox

Other metrics improved, too—Gini dropped from 59 in 2000 to 51 in 2019 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI/?locations=CO>. About a third of Colombians live on less than \$5.50 a day in 2019, but strikingly, that’s a progress, it is down from about 2/3 of Colombians in 2000.

The US v Colombia in Pictures: More and More Expensive Stuff, Less Happiness

It is recognized even by some economists that not only commodities matter for wellbeing (e.g., Stiglitz et al. 2009); yet few seem to notice that Latin America shines on non-commodity dimension and that the West should learn from Latin America. Notably social relations, quantity and quality, are arguably the best in the world in Latin America.

World development is typically about dollar amounts and physical stuff: more income, less poverty, more and better roads, more

labor force participation and less unemployment and so on. But such focus produces an outcome of a “Lion in a Golden Cage.”²² The idea is that we focus on the cage, making it expensive and pretty, but we forget about the lion—and no matter how fancy and expensive is the cage, lion won’t be happy in it.

The point is that the apparent economic or even livability superiority of the US over Colombia actually is mostly economic. And more expensive physical infrastructure doesn’t make it more livable and actually can make it less livable.

It is often overlooked point that something less developed economically and cheaper is actually better (happier).

The US infrastructure is great for business or making money, but it is bad for living there. It could be a difficult tradeoff to solve: economic growth v wellbeing, except that a very convincing argument has already been made that we do not need any more economic growth (Kallis et al. 2012, Kallis 2011, Van den Bergh 2011).

The US has this strange obsession with excellence/perfection and productivity, also in terms of built environment apparently thinking that the more ordered, organized, and man-made, the better. But the thinking was not always this way. Thoreau, for instance, was an American (Thoreau 1995 [1854], 1993).

The following are one of the authors own subjective/anecdotal opinions. Note: when picking images I dropped the Google’s yellow man more or less randomly only given rural, urban, suburb, toll, etc and took first useful image. I tried to avoid to cherry pick positive and negative imaginary. Comments welcomed! Contact the corresponding author. For best results zoom as much as screen allows.

In fig 3 obvious difference is width, 6 v 2 lanes, and economically 6 beats 2—can move more stuff faster, but assuming the same traffic per lane, it is more interesting and fun or joy to ride on smaller roads.²³ The other less obvious difference is vegetation—around I-95 it is pedigreed nicely trimmed man made fake nature; around 25 it is real wild nature—more happiness there too. In figure 3 the US appears more boring, robotic, and fake (alien-like); all that matters is to get from A to B.²⁴.

Figure 3: A major road/highway in the middle of nowhere.

(a) US I-95 rural MD, couple miles N of Susquehanna River

(b) Colombian 25 (Pan Americana), between Cali and Popayan



In fig 4 here we are passing through towns—on 295 through Cherry Hill, but who would have noticed looks the same as I-95 in previous picture, whether rural or urban, there’s the same fake nature on the side.²⁵

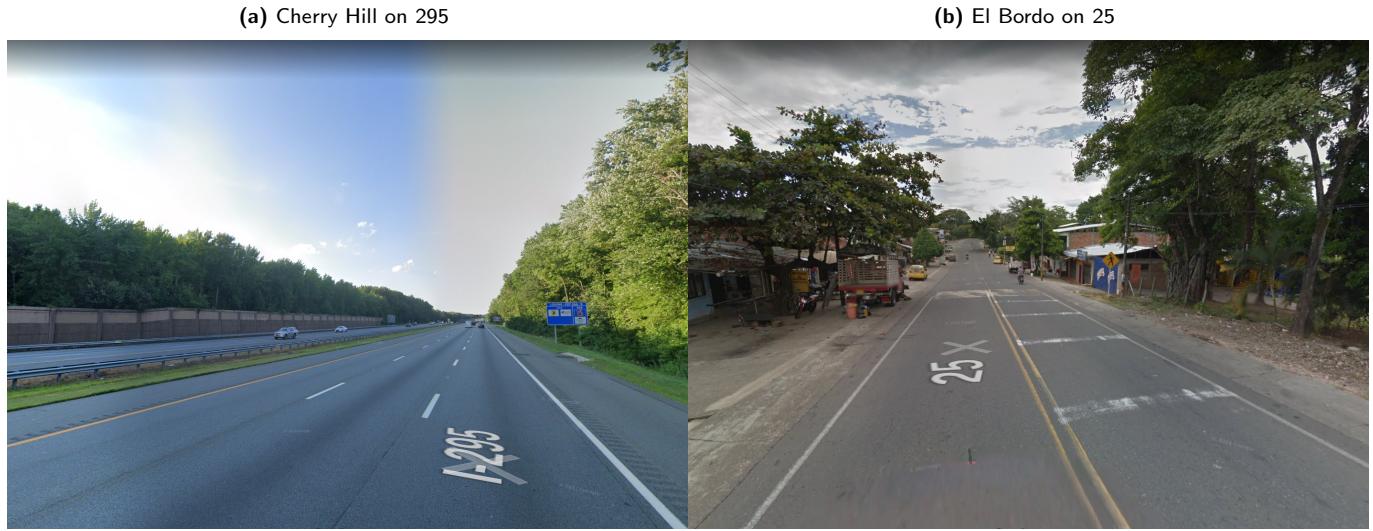
²²I am grateful for this idea to Mariano Rojas at ISQOLS 2023. Any misinterpretation or misunderstanding is mine. Inspiration also comes from Quercia (2014)—the idea is that what matters when traveling is not only speed and distance.

²³And adding more lanes does not automatically mean less traffic, often on the contrary, people decide to drive more—adding more lanes for traffic is like loosing your belt for obesity (e.g., Duany et al. 2001).

²⁴And why not more fun highway, say from rural mountainous Tennessee? Because the contrast is for the flat, dense, developed and wealthy North East—that’s where economic productivity thrives. As a side note, keep in mind that 25 is not some small rural road—it’s perhaps the most major road in the Americas, the Pan Americana. Picking less major road in the US and less major road in Colombia would not change the contrast much

²⁵295 not NJ Turnpike, to be conservative, NJ Turnpike is even more fake.

Figure 4: Passing through a town.



In fig 5 we are approaching toll (Del Mem Br)—looks unwelcoming, like an entrance to minimum security prison—can't pull over, rest, eat, or relax. Toll (peaje) on 25 looks better, again natural wild vegetation, can pull over and rest a bit, buy an organic orange.

Figure 5: Approaching toll.



In fig 6 even toll booth looks little more friendly and welcoming in Colombia.

Last but not least let's hang out in a city in fig 7. Say you are a weary traveler arriving at 30th st station in Philly. You get out of the station, and it's a desert—nowhere to hangout, have to keep walking. You arrive to terminal de transporte in Cali, get out of the building and plenty of places to buy food, drinks, and sit down.

Below are links with geographic coordinates to all pictures so that the reader can locate each of the places discussed above and explore more.

fig ??:

https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6003437,-76.0444379,3a,75y,249.22h,83.1t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1s0wpnM0Yc9KK6YD62e0!6shhttps%3F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3D0wpnM0Yc9KK6YD6ZhdiJQ%26cb-client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D150.322%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192

Figure 6: Paying toll.

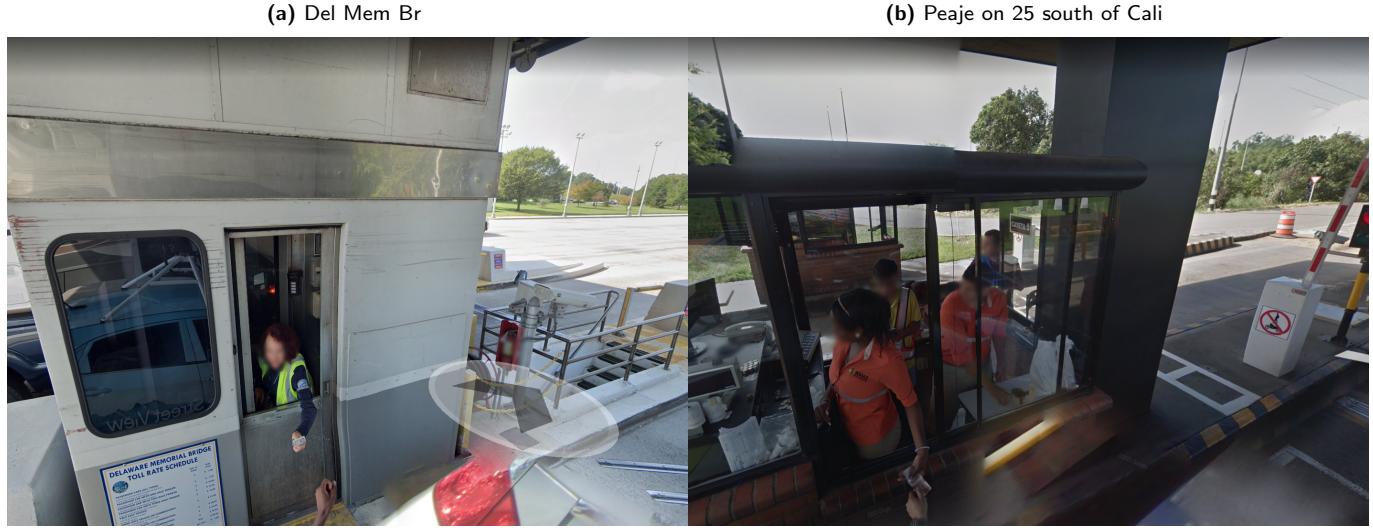
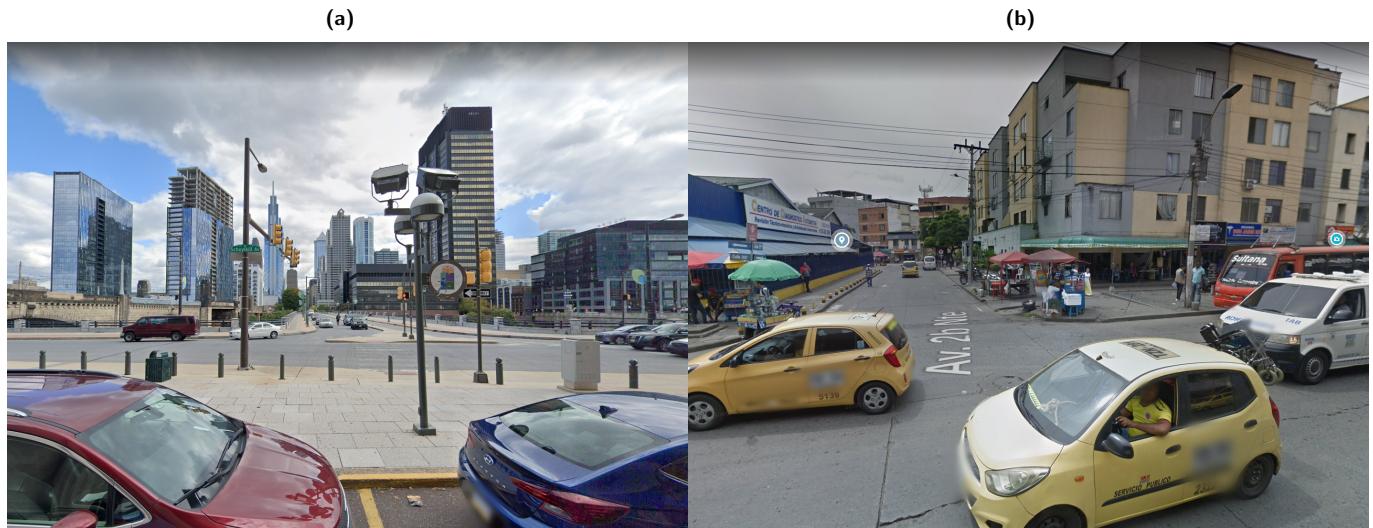


Figure 7: Getting out of the train station and bus terminal. (Note: no trains in Colombia.)



https://www.google.com/maps/@2.7886904,-76.5521276,3a,75y,177.41h,100.48t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sDBBNlUaixNJL92e0!6shttps://2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DDBBNlUaixNJL9uUrulT5g%26cb-client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D259.4146%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656

fig 4

https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9151715,-74.9812986,3a,75y,355.06h,94.72t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1svjTItcXHUaaWE2e0!6shttps://2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DvjTItcXHUaaWEkdG9iXbg%26cb-client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D108.39489%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192

https://www.google.com/maps/@2.1191142,-76.9827811,3a,75y,29.76h,78.92t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw%26cb-client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D155.053%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656

fig 5

https://www.google.com/maps/@3.1520675,-76.460229,3a,75y,181.56h,83.61t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s27q_DTIQZ3Tc67jR2e0!7i13312!8i6656

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6962957,-75.5445256,3a,75y,284.53h,94.14t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s6XzK4mx61AETyW2e0!7i16384!8i8192>

fig 6

same as above just move ahead

fig 7

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9556825,-75.1809809,3a,75y,98.3h,91.96t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sx0T6m0Tfk7frupGV2e0!7i16384!8i8192>

<https://www.google.com/maps/@3.4656412,-76.5213045,3a,75y,89.77h,81.78t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sWYCkArtZNxDNuhKT2e0!7i13312!8i6656>

Future Research and Questions that Remain

Much further research needed, especially in terms of systematic and deeper approaches—here the goal was to paint a broad picture.

A big question remaining is who would move where, ie if a person had reasonable information and opportunity to chose a place to live—would a better choice be the West, e.g., the US, or Latin America, e.g., Colombia. Ideally actual moving should be measured, not self-reported plans or ideas as it is likely to be biased especially if a person haven't actually experienced life in both countries.

There is obviously large migration from Latin America to the US, and surely more people want to come to the US than leave it, but this doesn't mean that the US is the best place to live—people mostly come to the US for the money, not necessarily for quality of life.

Indeed recent media reports argue the opposite—people are leaving the US for Latin America for better quality of life there, eg Californians and others are moving to Mexico; and anecdotal evidence—many westerners fall in love with Colombia.

So while presumably many Colombians would like to move to the US, and not many Americans would like to move to Colombia, it should be noted that indeed many Westerners, from better objective conditions, do move to Colombia.

To provoke discussion and spark research, these are only speculations so far.

World Economic Forum report 2017

World Economic Forum (WEF) indicators are in figure ??.

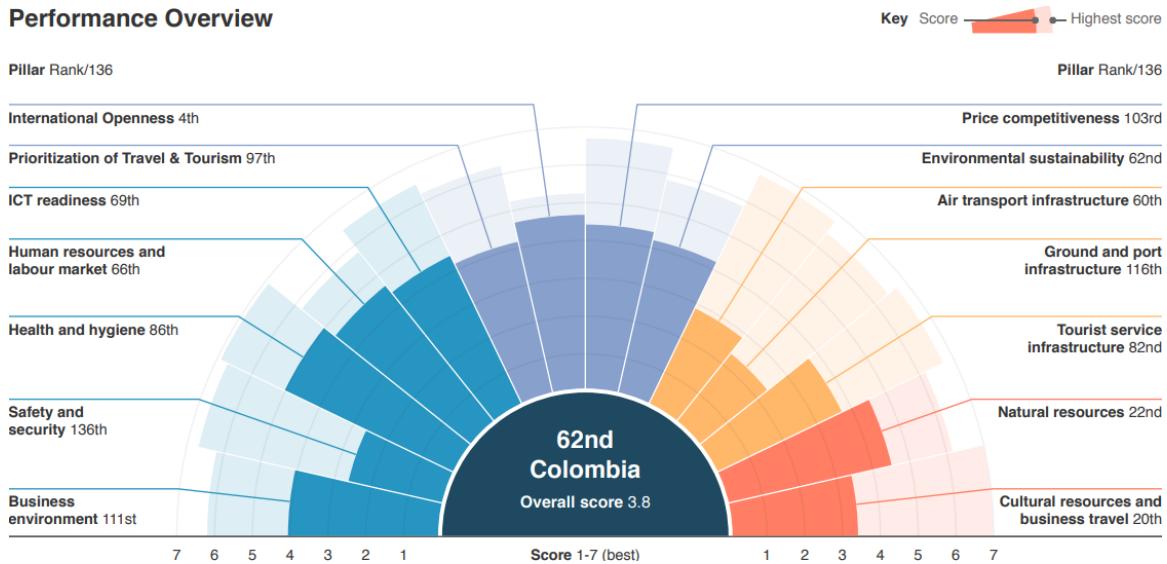


Figure 8: World Economic Forum report 2017 from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TTCR_2017_web_0401.pdf.

Colombia has everything: Pacific, Caribbean, jungle, desert, mountains, you name it, like Latin America in one country. So it is striking that according to WEF in terms of Prioritization of Travel & Tourism Colombia ranks 97th out of 136 countries (World Economic Forum 2017). Its air transport infrastructure is good, 60th, but Ground and Port Infrastructure is poor, 116th. But the worst is Safety and Security, 136th/136. Surely Colombia should work to improve safety, but much progress has already been done, and it is important to point out that much of the country is safe, and dangerous Colombia is more of a stigma of the past than present reality.

USNEWS measures QOL as: A good job market, Affordable, Economically stable, Family-friendly, Income equality, Politically stable, Safe, Well-developed public education system, Well-developed public health system—see <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/colombia>.

Freedom is Even The National Motto (Liberdad y Orden)



Figure 9: *Liberdad y Orden.*

In the US despite all the hype about freedom, the motto is “In God We Trust.” Or the older version, “E pluribus unum” refers to being united, not necessarily free.