

ONLINE APPENDIX

for convenience appended here [but note: this section will NOT be a part of the final version of the manuscript, but will be available as online appendix instead]

1 Universality of the Research Results and the Limitations

The arguments and results presented here likely generalize to some degree to other Latin countries, as there are many similarities across the continent, perhaps especially the Caribbean—there may be “Caribbean energy.” Ecuador’s energy, for instance, seems more flat. So perhaps a part of the Colombian happiness magic mixture is climate and topography—one direction for future research.¹

Still, even within Colombia, there are important differences. Colombia is a diverse country partly at least due to poor roads connecting remote areas. And likewise, the most connected city,² Bogota, the capital, is actually quite different from the rest of the Colombia, more Western, more alienated.

Colombia is westernizing as tourism has been booming and foreign capital flowing, e.g., as seen in multiple tourist destinations throughout the country and commercial centers (*centro comercial*).

This paper argues Colombian and possibly wider Latin American effect on happiness. Future research can disentangle what it actually is about Colombia that results in happiness. We have hypothesized a number of factors, notably social connection and positive freedom. Moreno (2013) lists various hypotheses as to happiness predictors in Colombia that could be used in the future research: biodiversity, climate diversity, plenty of festivals/holidays, healthy lifestyle and food, dancing. Furthermore, future research could disentangle happy Colombians from unhappy Colombians—despite very high average happiness of 8.5 out of 10, some Colombians are unhappy—who are they and what makes it miserable in the paradise?

Limitations of the present research are explored in the following subsection.

1.1 Alternative Explanations and Counterarguments

The proposition of “fool’s paradise” in Colombia may have some merit. The concept of “fool’s paradise” is related to the concept of “ignorance is a bliss.” Likewise, perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia—see online appendix for discussion.

¹There are studies on climate and happiness (e.g., Rehdanz and Maddison 2005), and some topographical features such as body of water (White et al. 2013), but we need more.

²By far the largest airport and multitude of highways.

The survey data does show that Colombians living in Colombia and making Colombian salary are very happy on average. 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?

We argue that livability is mostly good enough in Colombia, but this is with a caveat—as 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 a 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. If the malnourished in abject poverty among rampant crime are even only moderately happy, this is indeed “fool's paradise.” (Still, such extreme un-livability is not typical of Colombia; it is minority).

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).

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,³ 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.

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—people adapt (Graham 2009). 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 also resilience, positive outlook, ability to make out most of little.

³Likewise, in general, Colombian poor are happy—In the poorest income quintile life satisfaction was above 8 on a 10-point scale (Hurtado 2016).

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 appears unthinkable to the Westerners that not a wealthy country such as Colombia can be very 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).

There is plenty of theory why a peasant would be happy (notably contact with nature) and there is empirical evidence, too (e.g., 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 sometimes, especially among the economists, 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 Latinos (paradox of happy peasants, fool’s paradise, etc). 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 (Kasser 2016, Dittmar et al. 2014, Brown and Kasser 2005, Kasser 2003, Schmuck et al. 2000, Kasser and Ryan 1993, Leonard 2010).

While degrading SWB to a commodity item in utility function probably only makes sense to economists: “happiness is a commodity in the utility function in the same way that owning a car and being healthy are” (Becker and Rayo 2008, p. 89), still, happiness is not everything. Then Colombia may be as well happier than the US, but the utility may be higher in the US (as there are more commodities). And this could help explaining how people vote with their feet—it is Colombians (and Latinos) who flock to the US (and the West), and not the other way round. Although recently there is a significant movement in the other direction—see online appendix for a brief discussion.

Perhaps, one reason for lower life satisfaction in the US (v Colombia) is that there are more regrets as there are more opportunities (the pond is bigger and it’s more difficult to be a big fish)—similarly as urban (v rural) life tends to result in more regrets (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2024). Likewise, expectations or aspirations may be higher in the US v Colombia, and they decrease happiness as per equation: *happiness = experience or achievement – expectations or aspirations*. Colombians’ happiness seem to depend less on economics, politics and external affairs in general; rather it is about family and personal relations (Martínez and Short 2020).

How much Colombian happiness is about a person and how much about environment? For instance, are Colombian immigrants in the US happy? Does it help if they live in a Colombian enclave? And the other migration side—are Westerners happy in Colombia, and

does it hurt if they are mostly around other Westerners?⁴

A big question and an elephant in the room remains. If Colombia (and Latin America) are so great, why Colombians and Latinos flock in the droves to the West, notably the US? And those who stay—is ignorance a bliss, are they wearing pink glasses?

A preliminary short answer we offer is that people simply are not informed well, both Colombians and Latinos flocking to the West, and Westerners staying away from Colombia and Latin America.⁵ The perception of Western livability or quality of life is overrated and that in Colombia and Latin America are underrated—livability metrics overemphasize material comfort and undervalue experience.

1.1.1 Who Would Move Where?

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.

2 Subjective Wellbeing Defined; And Explored Across Countries

Again, the body of the paper have used evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction as opposed to affective happiness, positive and negative affects/emotions, or Eudaimonia/flourishing/functioning. But here we offer an extended discussion and auxiliary points.

The most general definition of wellbeing refers to people's feelings, experiences, and perceptions of their overall quality of life, including the positive and negative assessments people make of their lives and how they interpret their experiences (OECD 2013). Three measurements are widely accepted: evaluative, affective, and eudaimonic (OECD 2013). The evaluative measurement is commonly

⁴There are studies on happiness and migration, notably by David Bartram (e.g., Bartram 2014, 2013, 2011), but need more on Latinos and Westerners including their living environment.

⁵Also note that as we argue that people are not informed well, the goal of this paper is both to educate and to spark more research and debate.

used in policy-making discussions and typically uses overall life satisfaction (or Cantril's ladder of life) on a Likert scale (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters 2004). Affect measures focus on measuring emotions (positive and negative) that people feel, like happiness or worry (Kahneman and Krueger 2006). Eudaimonic measures focus on the functioning and fulfillment of the person seeking to capture elements of wellbeing such as autonomy, learning, goal orientation, or purpose in life (Huppert et al. 2008). In this article, we use the concept of *subjective WellBeing (SWB)* to encapsulate the different accepted metrics in the field.

2.1 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).

2.2 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 (not always) 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 2017).

2.3 High Cognitive/Evaluative Life Satisfaction in Scandinavia, and High Affective Happiness in Latin America

Countries where people have better individual and social conditions report greater subjective wellbeing—Scandinavians are closest to achieving the best possible life (Cantril's ladder) (e.g., Helliwell et al. 2020). In addition to the individual conditions of high salaries and basic needs covered, Scandinavia is characterized by the strength of its institutions, respect for civil rights, high interpersonal and institutional trust and social cohesion, low gender gaps and inequality (Martela et al. 2020). Likewise, other high income developed countries tend to be have high life satisfaction. People in developed countries have a greater chance of achieving the best possible life and be satisfied with their lives.

However, when SWB is measured through affective balance (positive and negative emotions), the correlation between GDP per capita and SWB is moderate only (Rojas 2015, 2019). The frequency of positive emotions experienced by people in the developed nations is not as high as one may expect. The positive emotions (such as positive affect and happiness) are often lower in developed countries than in developing countries, especially Latin America. SWB is not only about economic progress. Personal relationships and positive emotions play a significant role (Campbell et al. 1976). Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark, well known for their high living standards and low inequality, increasingly report low happiness. In developed countries in 2020, people report spending only six hours weekly with friends and family, almost half an hour less than in the previous decade; and 1 in 11 people report not having close friends or relatives to count on for help (van Zanden et al. 2020).

3 Purchasing Power in Colombia Not That Different From The West

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.

4 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.

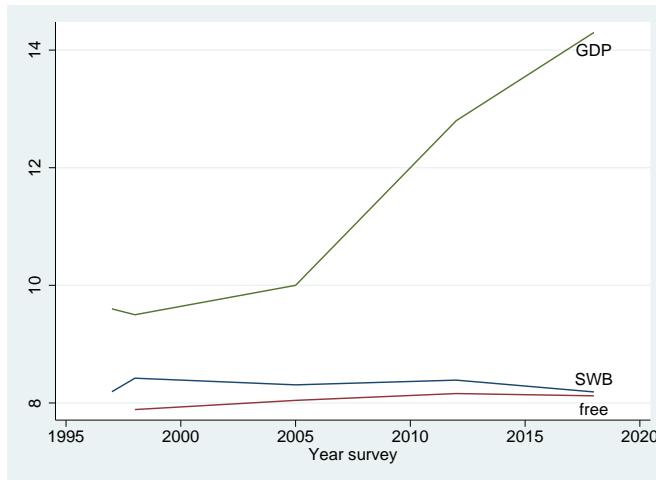


Figure 1: Easterlin's Paradox

Other metrics improved, too—Gini dropped from 59 in 2000 to 51 in 2019 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POVTGINI/?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.

5 The US v Colombia in Pictures: The More Stuff, The 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.”⁶ 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

⁶I 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.

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 2 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.⁷ 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 2 the US appears more boring, robotic, and fake (alien-like); all that matters is to get from A to B.⁸.

Figure 2: 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

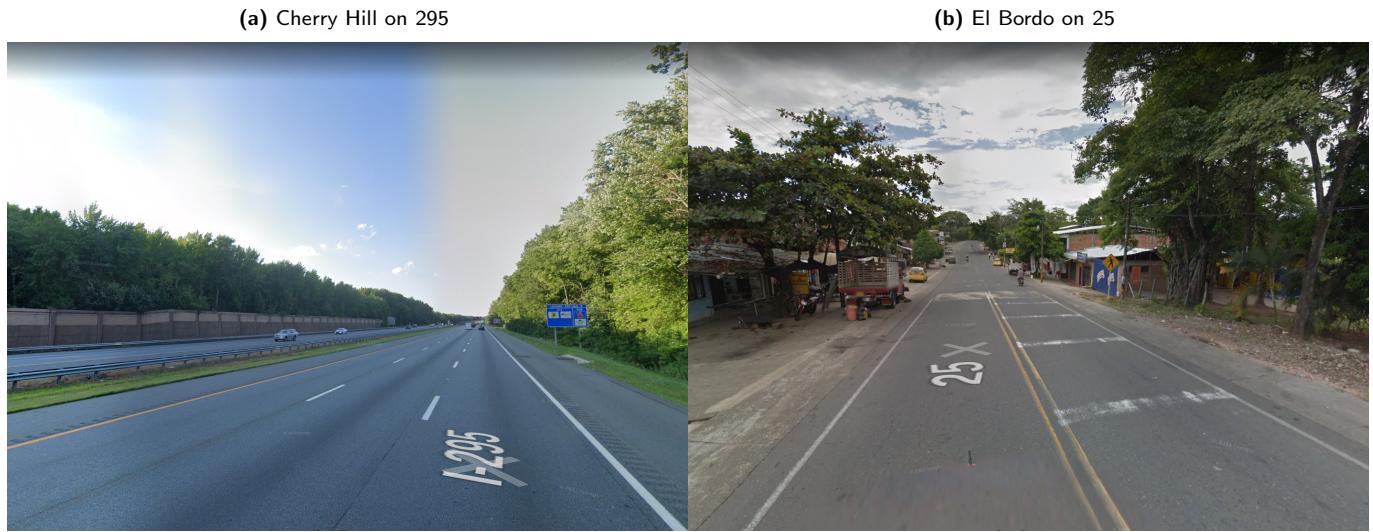


⁷ And adding more lanes does not automatically mean less traffic, often on the contrary, people decide to drive more—adding more lanes for traffic is like loosing your belt for obesity (e.g., Duany et al. 2001).

⁸ And 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

In fig 3 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.⁹

Figure 3: Passing through a town.



In fig 4 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 4: Approaching toll.



In fig 5 even toll booth looks little more friendly and welcoming in Colombia.

Last but not least let's hang out in a city in fig 6. 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.

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

Figure 5: Paying toll.

(a) Del Mem Br



(b) Peaje on 25 south of Cali

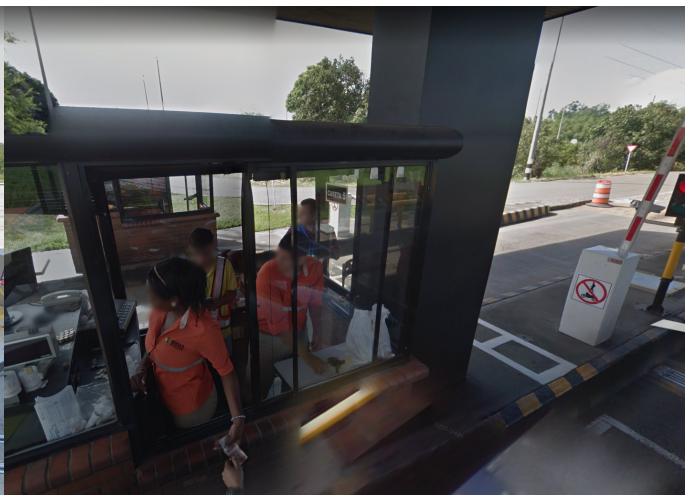
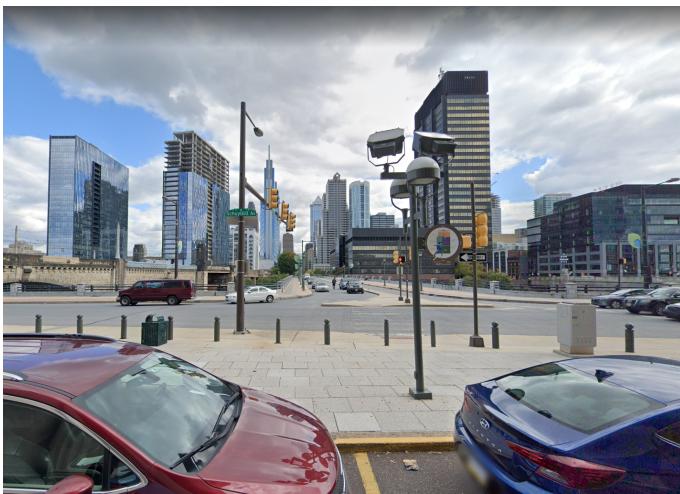


Figure 6: Getting out of the train station and bus terminal. (Note: no trains in Colombia.)

(a)



(b)



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 2:

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6003437,-76.0444379,3a,75y,249.22h,83.1t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1s0wpnM0Yc9KK6YD6>
<https://www.google.com/maps/@2.7886904,-76.5521276,3a,75y,177.41h,100.48t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sDBBNlUaixNJL9>

fig 3

https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9151715,-74.9812986,3a,75y,355.06h,94.72t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1svjTItcXHUaahWE2e0!6shttps://streetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DvjTItcXHUaahWEkdG9iXbg%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!1sLImUajMcEKyf6eLx2e0!6shttps://streetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D155.053%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656

fig 4

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 5

same as above just move ahead

fig 6

<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!1sWYCkArtZNxDNuKT2e0!7i13312!8i6656>

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