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## 2 Colombia

### 2.1 Colombia as a Post-Conflict Destination?

Colombia, a country of about 50 million people situated in the north of South America, has been off the tourist map for decades due to its high level of violence. While cities such as Medellín and Cali were considered as among the most dangerous in the world until the end of the 20th century, the whole country has been plagued by a long-lasting armed conflict involving guerrillas, paramilitaries, narcos, and regular government forces. The security situation significantly improved during the last two decades, and in 2016, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government signed peace agreements promising to put these years of war behind them. However, the violence is still far from being over and since the peace process began, hundreds of social leaders, former guerrillas and civilians have lost their lives. In view of this, many question the label of “post-conflict” officially attributed to the country, and prefer to refer to “post-agreements” (González & Álvarez 2018; Guillard & Naef 2019). Yet, the general improvement in security, especially in large urban centers and specific areas like the Caribbean coast and the coffee region, resulted in an important increase of foreign visitors, as well as local tourists eager to rediscover their country. This rapid growth of the tourism sector is not happening without tensions. The public authorities are struggling to adapt tourism governance to a fast-changing setting. Indeed, in Colombia’s “post-conflict” context, tourism is not always a priority: the formulation and application of laws and regulations regarding tour guidance, hospitality, transport, or natural conservation are still weak. Nonetheless, Colombia’s tourism and promotional bodies have been very active in reshaping the image of a country presented for more than half of a century as an epicenter of violence and drug trafficking.

In 2017, the Colombian regional newspaper *El País* highlighted the fact that half of the map of Colombia presented in the Lonely Planet travel book was a grey area without any references (Linde, 2017). Working to color this map and thus participate in enhancing the attractiveness of a country plagued by decades of war implies the necessity of agency from stakeholders involved in the tourism sector. This chapter aims to explore the role and the limits of tourism governance in the construction and the promotion of Colombia’s “post-conflict” image.

While actors involved in tourism and place-branding actively participate in building destination image, other dynamics contribute to shaping it. Representations from international media and popular culture significantly influence visitors’ geographic imaginaries (Debarbieux, 2016; Gravari-Barbas & Graburn, 2012; Salazar, 2012; Salazar & Graburn, 2016). These imaginaries themselves may impact a country’s image. Actors involved in the tourism sector may adapt their offer to globally marketed representations. An international movie portraying a specific city can for instance influence the way

tourism stakeholders will brand it. This can be even more the case when actors detached from official tourism bodies take part in the construction of such an image. Hence, the many private entrepreneurs increasingly participating in the growing tourism sector of Colombia play an important role in the creation of a new destination image. The many dimensions influencing the construction of a country's image and identity, as well as the diversity of actors involved, imply a high level of complexity for stakeholders associated with tourism governance and place branding.

Hence, the objective here is to explore some strategies developed by tourism stakeholders implicated in the construction of Colombia's new, post-conflict image. The questions underlying this analysis are the following: Who are the main actors involved in such a process? What are the obstacles related to the promotion of a country aiming to turn its back on a violent past? What are some of the main representations associated with Colombia nowadays and how can tourism governance influence them? This chapter first explores the role of tourism governance in a context of postwar place branding. It will briefly look back at the rebirth of the Colombian tourism sector, concentrating on stakeholders associated with the promotion of the country's new image. It will then focus on the city of Medellín as a case study, to demonstrate that diverse and competing representations are produced in the touristscape of a place that, just a decade ago, was still considered as one of the most violent in the world.

## 2.2 Tourism Governance and the Post-War Image

Tourism governance is defined by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) as a system and process to define strategies and implement them to achieve competitiveness and sustainable development in the tourism destination (UNWTO, 2011). As Scott and Marzano demonstrate, governance is a more encompassing phenomenon than government: "It embraces governmental institutions, but also subsumes informal, nongovernmental mechanisms whereby those persons and organizations within its purview move ahead, satisfy their needs, and fulfill their want" (2015, p. 3). Moreover, considering the tourism sector as an open and fragmented industry, Borges et al. (2014, as cited in Scott & Marzano) state that tourism governance is therefore a complex and multidimensional issue in which the state and other actors depend on each other. Various stakeholders thus interact in this process, implying initiatives from private and public sectors, as well as interventions from different levels: local, national, and international. An aggregation of diverging interests can lead to conflicting views of what should be expressed and represented in the touristscape of a country. This can be even more the case in a post-conflict context, where dissonant representations of the past are progressively incorporated into the tourism sector. Therefore, the promotion of tourism and the reconstruction of a country's image after an armed conflict represent a challenge for stakeholders often driven by diverging interests. The (re)construction of a

post-conflict destination image has already generated a significant amount of work in tourism studies (Guilland 2012; Guilland & Naef 2019; Ndlovu & Chigora 2019; Shirley et al. 2018; Vitic & Ringer 2008). However, analysis looking specifically at the role of tourism governance is still rare; this chapter proposes to explore some of the governance challenges related to the construction of Colombia's new destination image. As Scott and Marzano (2015) put it, the development of a country brand represents an important issue for central governments. "It can provide an 'umbrella' under which the sub-national brands may function. Clearly the governance of tourism at the sub-national level must involve consideration of the potential to work under a national umbrella brand, to be effective" (Scott & Marzano, 2015, p. 14). However, as the Colombian example will demonstrate, the variety of actors involved in this process can lead to the diffusion of antagonistic images, and therefore clash with this umbrella brand. After a war, images of peace are in conflict with representations related to a violent and dissonant heritage. In this competing arena, tourism plays a central role in shaping Colombia's post-war image, through the various images and narratives it produces and diffuses.

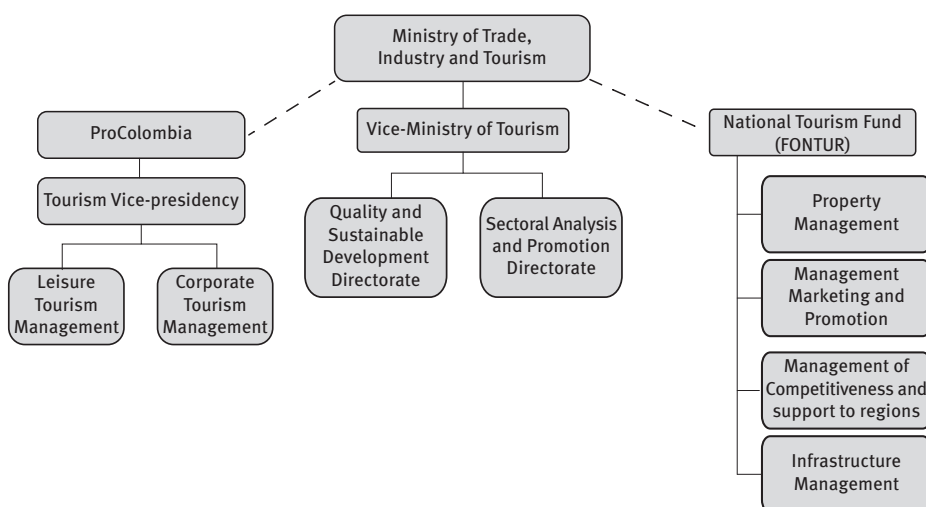
## 2.3 Colombia's Touristscape

Internal violence in the country has seriously affected the tourism sector in recent decades, especially from the 1980s to the 2000s. Colombia saw the arrival of 3 million non-resident tourists in 2018, about three times more than a decade ago and twice as many as 2009, a point when the country was considered to be "back on the world tourism map," by the UNWTO (2009). In response to a decrease in homicides and kidnappings since 2002, Colombia's tourism trade has been growing every year and the sector is considered as a key area of development in a country struggling to put decades of war behind it. As stated in a WTO report on the reconstruction of the Colombian tourism sector, "Colombia is a country that has managed to come back from the edge of the abyss. With its very survival threatened – in a way that is without parallel in the world – by the combined effects of drug-trafficking, guerrillas, and terrorism for many years" (UNWTO, 2009, p. 3).

Several programs were developed by the authorities to secure the main tourism routes, such as "Vive Colombia. Viaja por ella" (Live Colombia. Travel all over it.) and "Rutas seguras" (Safe Routes). While this context encouraged an increasing number of foreign visitors eager to discover a country which was absent from the tourism map for decades, it also brought freer movement for the Colombians who started to rediscover their own country. International bodies praised the rebirth of tourism as a factor for "social cohesion and a reaffirmation of the self-confidence of Colombian society" (UNWTO, 2009, p. 10). The founder of the conservative "Democratic Center" political party and former president Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who ran the country from 2002 to 2010 with an iron hand, certainly played a role in securing the roads and strengthening the

domestic tourism sector with the so-called “tourist caravans” (*caravanas turísticas*), a program included in his Democratic Security and Defense Policy. In accordance with the program, on specific days military forces would provide reinforced protection for roads reaching major holiday attractions (Hudson, 2010).

The government also worked hard to bring back international tourists, mainly through its executive branch ProColombia, a government agency in charge of promoting international tourism and foreign investment. The strategy appeared to be fruitful: since 2014, Colombia has been regularly recognized as a new hotspot for international tourists by travel guides and international media. Other government bodies (Figure 2.1) related to the tourism sector are the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism and the Vice-Ministry of Tourism, who both support the management of tourism in the regions, as well as the competitiveness and the sustainability of the sector (OECD, 2018). However, in 1996 some regions gained more autonomy with the establishment of the General Tourism Law, which stated that regional and local authorities are responsible for developing tourism activities in their territories. Since 2013 and the Decree 1837, the Vice-Ministry of Tourism works in collaboration with other government entities. The Superior Tourism Council acts as a coordinating body and brings together relevant ministries in the field of tourism. The Vice-Ministry of Tourism is also responsible for the management, collection, and implementation of tourism resources, through the National Tourism Fund (FON-TUR). The main sources of funding include fiscal resources, obligatory contributions from tourism service providers, tourism taxes from international visitors entering Colombia by air (US\$15 per visitor), resources from the management of tourism properties by the State, income from the exploitation of tourism-related brands owned by the Ministry and penalties imposed on tourism service providers for legal infractions (OECD, 2018).



**Figure 2.1:** Organizational chart of tourism bodies. (Source: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, adapted from Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism, 2018).

The Colombian National Development Plan 2014–18 places tourism as a priority sector in the country's development strategy, through the establishment of the Tourism Plan 2014–18: Tourism for Peace Building. As implied in the title of the document, tourism is seen as a vector to consolidate peace. The plan is that by 2018 the sector will generate 300,000 new jobs and US\$6 billion in foreign currency (OECD, 2018). Three tourism sub-sectors are identified: responsible and sustainable tourism, tourism culture, and peace tourism. The promotion of so-called “post-conflict destinations” is part of the priority action of the Tourism Plan. Tourism development in areas of former conflict is seen as a way to “rebuild the social fabric and the culture of the territories, as well as to develop value chains and improve the quality of life of host communities through responsible and sustainable practices” (OECD, 2018, p. 317).

## 2.4 Narcos in the Realm of Magical Realism

Colombian institutions are working hard on the construction of the country's post-war image. While ProColombia is the central public body in charge of this task, international bodies are also active here. The WTO has been significantly promoting the country and praising its national campaigns, which present “the true reality of the country,” as it states in its report “Colombia, back on the map of world tourism” (UNWTO, 2009, p. 3).

The objectives of Colombia's communication strategy are not to redefine the profile of the country, or its identity or its ideology. Rather to highlight all of these identifying elements and framing them in the current reality of Colombia in order to transmit a new image, free of stereotypes and prejudices derived from a traumatic historical stage, which it has largely left behind. The WTO report highlights the fact that Colombia was already well-known by the worldwide public and that communication efforts were not needed to make the country known, but to correct a distorted image. In 2004, a national marketing strategy was put in place to create a brand image for the country. As Guillard (2012, p. 4) has demonstrated through its campaign “Colombia is passion,” one of its main goals was to bring Colombians together behind a common cause: “‘passion’ was chosen as the theme to characterize the population. [. . .] it was all about getting the Colombian people to claim for themselves this image of the country. By creating a feeling of common identification, it was easier to convert the Colombians into real promotional actors.” Guillard also shows how a few years later Colombian representatives took the notion of risk, previously associated with the country, and managed to convert it into an opportunity, with the launch of a new campaign: “Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay.”

In 2013, ProColombia inaugurated a new promotional campaign based on “magical realism.” The main idea was to change the perception of potential visitors and “to show the charms of Colombian tourist destinations, as well as progress in terms of security and stability” (ProColombia, 2013, n.p.). Magical realism is a category encompassing literature, painting, and cinema and is closely associated with Latin American culture (Flores, 1955; Slemon, 1988). It can be summarized as the presence of irrational and magical elements in a rational and realistic environment. It has been closely linked to the Colombian novelist and Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, and in particular to his worldwide best-seller *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). According to ProColombia former president, Maria Claudia Lacouture, things that might be normal for Colombians are “a magical image, a revealing moment, an unforgettable experience for a tourist” (ProColombia, 2013, n.p.). This dynamic has also been reinforced by the worldwide success of the movie *Magia Salvaje* (Wild Magic) portraying the wilderness of the country by associating it with notions of enchantment and strangeness. Although the movie was produced by Mike Slee, a British director, it is often used in the promotion of Colombia for tourists (Naef, 2018).

ProColombia’s repertoire of images related to magical realism features elements like mysterious jungles (Figure 2.2), colorful seas, exotic animals, and enigmatic indigenous traditions. However, for some actors, magical realism can resonate differently. In Colombia, narco-traffickers were sometimes referred to as “magicians” due to their ability to accumulate huge fortunes in a very short time (Naef, 2018). The international Netflix series *Narcos*, often associates the notion of magical realism with narcotics. “Colombia is where it began. And anyone who spent real time here knows why. It is a place where the bizarre shakes hands with the inexplicable on a daily basis.” The worldwide success of the show, especially in the United States, which represents one of the main foreign tourist markets for Colombia, contributed to shaping the international reputation of the country. Here, opposing views of magical realism clash. ProColombia’s images of an enchanting and peaceful land compete with the Netflix portrayal of a violent country ruled by criminals (Guilland & Naef, 2019). The description of the third city of Colombia by the main character of the *Narcos* is illustrative: “Cali is the Soviet Union with sun.”

At the end of 2017, in parallel with its 25th anniversary, ProColombia launched a new campaign: “Colombia: Land of Sabrosura.” After five market studies, this local word without a direct English translation was chosen to express emotions such as positive attitude, beauty and flavor, elements in tune with a context of peace. While tourism can without a doubt serve as a tribune for presenting the positive transformation of a country previously at war (Causevic & Lynch 2011; Rivera 2008), competing representations are diffused, as in the field of popular culture with the example of an international media like Netflix.





Figure 2.2: ProColombia Magical realism tourism campaign.

## 2.5 Tourism and the Branding of the New Medellín

The example of Medellín, the second city of Colombia, contains thought provoking elements related to tourism rebranding. After decades of being considered a capital for crime and drug trafficking, it is now promoted by international organizations and the media as a resilient and innovative city. Achievements in architecture, security, social development and mobility, like urban cable-cars and outdoor electric stairs (Figure 2.3), are regularly used to illustrate the transformation of Medellín. This discourse is widely shared at the municipality level by the official bodies in charge of city marketing and tourism, such as the Medellín Convention and Visitor Bureau and the Sub-Secretary for Tourism.

The transformation of the city is also an important resource for the local tourism sector, who promotes “tourism of transformation” as one of its most important products (Naef, 2016). However, the city’s narco-related past is also central stage in the offer of local guides, who sell “pablo tours” or “narco-tours” to foreign visitors (Naef, 2018a). Here, again, representations of the city compete and clash. Official tourism institutions and private entrepreneurs depict disparate and often conflicting facets of Medellín. The municipality uses tourism as a window to promote its transformation into a resilient, innovative, and peaceful city, while some private tour guides cash in





**Figure 2.3:** Tourists visiting the outdoor electric stairs located at the heart of the commune 13. (Source: Photo by the author, 2017).

on the past violence by offering narco-tours as a tourism attraction. Governmental tourism agencies do not provide any support or encouragement for this practice. Tourism officials, as well as town representatives, clearly express discomfort, but never undertook any preventive measures until recently. In 2018, however, the mayor of Medellín, Federico Gutiérrez, took action against two emblematic sites of these narco-tours: The Mónaco building and the informal museum run by Roberto Escobar, the brother of the famous drug lord Pablo Escobar.

After a long period of controversial discussions, the municipality decided to tear down the Mónaco building, one of the former homes of Pablo Escobar and a key stop for most of the narco-tours. The Mónaco building was first adorned with placards in Spanish and English to explain to visitors the many atrocious crimes that Pablo Escobar ordered. The building was then destroyed on February 22nd, 2019, with great fanfare in front of a large media audience. Even the president Iván Duque made a quick trip from the capital to celebrate what he described as the triumph of the culture of legality. The 23,000 cubic meters of remains were disposed of by the city in a secret location. As stated in the daily *El Tiempo*: “The issue associated with the rubble is much more complex. They have been taken to an unknown

and secret location under a confidentiality clause. [. . .] There is a kind of symbolism and they want to prevent people from entering the site to search for remains.” (Gutiérrez, 2019). The site of the former Mónaco building is now in the process of being transformed into a memorial park for the victims of the past decades’ violence. In the frame of the project “Medellin embraces its history”, the “Inflexión Memorial Park” aims to change the symbolic value of this place, “by putting an end to the heroic perception of drug traffickers and instead, values and acknowledges those affected by the car bombs, targeted killings and other attacks committed between the eighties and the end of the 20th century” (Official website, 2019). As the New York Times stated when the decision to destroy the Mónaco building was made public, “The conflicting response to the building – municipal embarrassment or photo opportunity – is also a prime example of how Medellin still struggles over the Escobar narrative” (Casey, 2018, n.p.). In the same article, one collaborator of the Casa Memoria Museum added, “Pablo Escobar has become the pop icon of this story. The city saw no urgency to tell this part of history. It wasn’t a priority for the government until there was a problem, until suddenly you had narco-tours led by Popeye<sup>1</sup>” (Casey, 2018).

Another key site included in the narco-tours offer was shut down in 2018. A museum dedicated to Pablo Escobar, run by his brother Roberto, the former treasurer of the Medellin cartel, was housed in a former hideout of the drug kingpin (Naef, 2018a). This informal museum was closed during a joint action of the municipality, the Vice-Ministry of Tourism and the Department of Migration. This measure was presented as temporary and Roberto Escobar, at the time of writing, promptly announced his intention to reopen his museum as soon as possible. Yet, like the destruction of the Mónaco building, the action taken against this controversial museum demonstrates the will of official bodies to control the narrative related to Medellin’s narco-past. It is indeed the image of the city that is at stake; representations of a boomtown of innovation and progress are in conflict with the portrayal of a city doomed by violence and narcos (Figure 2.4).

Finally, action to counter the promotion of Medellin’s “narco-heritage” (Naef, 2018a) beyond Colombia’s borders was also undertaken. After spending close to 30 years in jail, Jhon Jairo Velásquez – alias “Popeye” – moved into Medellin’s tourism scene through the organization of private and pricey narco-tours (Palomino, 2017). In 2016, the Medellin sub-secretary of tourism lodged a complaint against a Puerto Rican tourist operator, who proposed a four-day trip in Colombia, labelled “Medellin during Halloween,” where one of the highlights was a dinner with Popeye (Restrepo, 2016). Pointing out that the offer did not comply with National Tourism Registry norms, the sub-secretary forced the tour operator to remove his advertisement. In the context of the global tourism offer, it was argued that action had to be taken against undermining

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<sup>1</sup> Jhon Jairo Velásquez – alias “Popeye” – was Pablo Escobar’s main hitman. He died on February 6th, 2020, from cancer.



**Figure 2.4:** In a souvenir shop of Medellín, the portrayal of Pablo Escobar (right) contrasts with the representation of the outdoor electric stairs (left), symbol of the transformation of Medellín. (Source: Photo by the author, 2017).

of the international image of Medellín. In a similar vein, several individuals in the Colombian community, located in France, have taken action against a Parisian cocktail bar – Medellín Paris – inspired by the narco-related past of the second city of Colombia. One week after the opening (where bags of flour were exposed everywhere in the bar as fake packs of cocaine) a demonstration was organized by Colombians expatriates asking for its closure. The bar was still open when this chapter was written, but the manager has changed certain elements of his decoration: a fake tomb of Pablo Escobar has been removed and an inscription on the wall was added: “Pablo no es la Colombia” (Pablo is not Colombia) (Loisy, 2019).

## 2.6 Tourism and Post-Conflict in “Locolombia”

Magical realism, as used in Colombia tourism promotion, describes an attractive exoticism for potential tourists. At the same time, the narco-world, where boundaries between myth and reality are often blurred, also seems to fit into the frame of magic realism. The spectacular life of Pablo Escobar and other drug lords are often described as reality surpassing fiction. Some tour guides offering narco-tours present the development of the narco-trade in Medellín as possible only in “Locolombia” (a contraction of “loco,” which means “crazy” and “Colombia”). The Netflix show

*Narcos* cashed in on this dark magical realism and undoubtedly helped to spread a picture of Medellín and Colombia which is very different from the one of peace and innovation promoted by official bodies. This dark representation of the city has provoked some criticisms, some specifically commenting on the fact that magical realism was part of the narrative of the series. The Colombian philosopher Armando Silva explained how audiovisual popular culture contributes to a kind of fascination and tolerance for narcos in Latin America. He added, “the major outrage of its directors [of *Narcos*] was to put all this criminal enterprise in a context of ‘magical realism’, justifying it by the fact that both could be born only in Colombia. Here the fiction yields to the ideology of its directors” (Silva, 2017, n.p.). The blogger Bernardo Aparicio García also stated. “The wonderful strangeness that García Márquez had brought to life in the realm of fiction, Pablo Escobar and the *mágicos* imposed on the real world through their ruthless ambition” (2015, p. 3). While magical realism was promoted in the tourism national narrative and associated mainly with natural wonders, other actors, from Netflix media to local guides in Medellín, tied the country’s narco-past to the realm of magical realism.

Behind designations such as “locolumbia,” “narcolombia,” or “medellinovation,” diverse and sometimes dissonant images are diffused. In terms of governance, the diversity of actors acting and interfering in the branding and the tourism sector of a country like Colombia pose serious challenges for stakeholders implicated in the construction of the country’s post-war image. Action undertaken to remove sites, such as the Mónaco building and Roberto Escobar’s museum from Medellín’s touristscape illustrates these challenges. After announcing the destruction of the Mónaco building, Medellín’s mayor Federico Gutiérrez (2016–2019) insisted on the importance of developing a tourism that “adds value to the city,” qualifying narco-tours as “predatory tourism.” “I invite people to Medellín, obviously, to learn our history, but our history told by us as an institution. Not by some of those who run these narco-tours, who were part of these narco-terrorist structures” (Amrani, 2018).

## 2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, the objective was to illustrate the diversity of actors influencing the construction of Colombia’s post-war image, specifically within the tourism sector. Through the lens of tourism governance, it demonstrates some of the challenges tourism stakeholders face when promoting the image of a country which is slowly achieving peace after decades of violence. In the tourism and memorial arena of Colombia, various actors – government officials, tour guides, former narcos, international tourism operators, media producers, etc. – all participate in diffusing different and often competing representations of the country, ranging from the exploitation of a violent

past and the promotion of perspectives of peace. While Colombia is promoted as a “magical” place, it conjures up different repertoires of images, where the strangeness related to the narco-world can also fit in.

Medellin serves as an enlightening case study for exploring the tensions these dissonant representations can create, between the hyper-visibility of Pablo Escobar’s memorabilia and the municipality’s objective to portray a city that has moved forward and is now a symbol of innovation and resilience. It also demonstrates that actors influencing tourism governance in the second city of Colombia range far beyond the sole official bodies. This might be even more significant after the reopening of Colombia to international visitors, following the severe lockdown that cities like Medellin endured as part of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the sanitary crisis, Medellin started experiencing a real boom in tourism arrivals and the authorities struggled to control the huge increase of guides moving into the city touristscape. The commune 13 and its internationally famous outdoor electric stairs, briefly mentioned above, saw more than 160,000 tourists in 2018 and became the city’s main tourist attraction. With the return of tourists after the lockdown, this strategic area will certainly be at the center of new governance challenges. In 2019, more than 400 guides, most of them without an official license, were active in this specific area. While most were Colombian, an increasing number of foreigners (mainly from Venezuela and Argentina) started to narrate the history of the conflict to foreign visitors, causing discomfort and anger within the local population. To remedy the absence of any state action, the community reactivated the grassroots “Tourism network of the commune 13.” The main objective was to coordinate the many actors involved in tourism activities in this district of Medellin. Furthermore, in tourist areas of the city, such as the commune 13 and the historical center, local street-gangs were also using tourism to empower themselves, through their racketing of tour guides and an increasing drug market targeting foreign tourists.

Colombia, a country rapidly repositioning itself on the world tourism map, is thus facing many issues, related to the dissemination of a positive and attractive image, as well as to the control of the many new actors integrating this expanding sector. As these lines are written and as Colombia is slowly reopening its tourist sites after several months of lockdown, the future seems open to many potentialities, but also many challenges in terms of governance. For tourism stakeholders and government officials concerned with the branding and promotion of Colombia, the most important of these challenges will be to find a middle path between oblivion and the acknowledgment of its dissonant and violent past, as well as to provide a stronger institutional frame for further tourism developments.

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