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**Surviving Pablo: The Rise of the Tourism Industry Surrounding
Colombia's Most Powerful Drug Lord**

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Report

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Abstract

Surviving Pablo: The Rise of the Tourism Industry Surrounding Colombia's Most Powerful Drug Lord

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Pablo Escobar was once the reason why international tourists feared traveling to Colombia. Now, more than two decades after his death in 1993, Colombia has become one of Latin America's most popular tourist destinations, and Escobar is a major tourist draw for the city of Medellín. Enterprising locals have capitalized on the intrigue surrounding the internationally infamous drug lord, devising tours to various sites in the city associated with him and his Medellín Cartel. The success of Netflix's "Narcos" series has only increased travelers' demand for additional Escobar-themed tourist opportunities, yet residents remain divided over Escobar's legacy and these tours. While some view the tours as lucrative business opportunities, others fear that such businesses only reinforce the stereotypes of violence and drug-prevalence that Colombia has long fought to overcome.

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Roberto Escobar wants you to know that he has done his time, and willingly too. He is quick to remind you, in case you didn't know, that he was the one who turned himself in to Colombian authorities – and that he served all 11 years of his drug trafficking sentence in a Colombian maximum-security prison. He's been a free man since 2003, and one with a clean conscience, spending his days raising money for AIDS research and a Colombian nonprofit that helps the homeless. As if to emphasize these points, Escobar spends a good deal of his time in the company of a Catholic priest.

Seated together at a patio table on the front lawn of Escobar's house in Poblado, an upscale neighborhood in Medellín, the pair could not be more different. One wears a black cassock, a large gold cross dangling across his chest and the other is dressed in a pastel-pink oxford shirt and navy chinos, a khaki baseball cap on his head. Escobar appears far older than 70, and speaks softly and slowly, pausing between each sentence. He is partially deaf and a lens in his glasses magnifies his one blind eye. This ailment – sustained on Dec. 18, 1993 when a letter bomb exploded in his jail cell – is the only visible connection to his criminal past.

Escobar is the elder brother of Pablo Escobar, the leader of the drug cartel that put Medellín, and Colombia, on the map in the 1980s. Their Medellín Cartel was one of the most powerful and most violent operations in the history of 20th century drug trafficking. Roberto left a promising career as a professional cyclist to work as the accountant for the Medellín Cartel, which earned billions of dollars trafficking cocaine to the U.S. The cartel also killed hundreds of politicians, judges, police officers, journalists, innocent bystanders and rival cartel members in Pablo Escobar's quest to become Colombia's most powerful man.

And now, it is Roberto's brother's legacy that brings a steady stream of foreigners to the house that once served as a main office for the Medellín Cartel – as well as a hiding place for Pablo Escobar in the days leading up to his death on Dec. 2, 1993, when he was gunned down on the other side of the city by the Colombian army and a police search squad. The elder Escobar converted the house into a museum dedicated to his brother's memory in 2010 because international interest in Pablo Escobar has not waned. Two decades after his death, he is as well known internationally as he was during the Medellín Cartel's heyday.

Pablo Escobar sells, and the Colombian tourism industry has latched on to the man whose actions once deterred foreigners from traveling to the country. Today, more than a dozen tour companies in Medellín offer Pablo Escobar-themed tours, many of which include a stop at the museum. Escobar maintains that he does not personally profit from these visits, and instead donates the museum's revenue to charity.

If you visit the museum, his friend the priest is the one who collects the payment – and one might wonder if the surviving Escobar retains his brother's business savvy and isn't getting some return on this venture.

“You're not a journalist, are you?” Escobar joked as he greeted me, grasping my arms and pulling me towards him so my face was inches away, allowing him to better make out what I look like. I had been given fair warning by my guide, Carlos Garcia, that Escobar is not a fan of journalists, who he charges upwards of \$1,000 for an interview. “It's best to go as a tourist and try to ask as many questions as you can,” Garcia advised,

because Escobar only charges 100,000 pesos, or the equivalent of roughly \$30, for a private tour.

But Escobar gave Elena, his brother's former assistant, the job of leading me through the museum. It's smaller than expected and only occupies three rooms on the house's first floor. Tourists can pose for a photo with one of Pablo's Harley Davidson motorcycles; the truck he used to smuggle coca paste from Peru – which was his entry into the cocaine business; the table where he ate one of his final meals; and a hollowed out desk used to hide stacks of money. Roberto's cycling trophies line a shelf and photos of him in cycling jerseys adorn the walls, along with portraits of members of the Escobar family. A bullet hole in one of the house's back windows is testament to another failed attempt on Escobar's life and serves as a reminder that despite the family's international fame and intrigue, Colombians remain divided over Pablo Escobar and those who worked alongside him.

Elena was brief in her descriptions of each item, and she politely inquired whether I'd like a photo next to one of the motorcycles. "Are you sure you don't want Don Roberto to sign a poster for you?" she asked in front of a table of souvenirs for sale, including various books Escobar has written about the Medellín Cartel and his brother's rise to fame. It is only at the end of the tour that Escobar made himself available for questions, but he struggled to hear me and stuck to a script, telling me what he wanted me to hear rather than answering what I'd asked. "Pablo was never convicted of a crime. The Colombian government blames Pablo for things he didn't do," he said emphatically. He said one of his primary motivations for creating the museum was to use it as a platform from which to correct the "lies" spread about his brother by the Colombian government

and media. His brother's one mistake, he said, was to get involved in Colombian politics. Pablo Escobar successfully ran for Congress in 1982 with the goal of preventing the Colombian government from signing an extradition treaty with the U.S., but his massive wealth attracted attention and drew too many questions. Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla forced him out of office two years later by exposing his criminal record and a 1977 drug trafficking arrest.

Today, on my visit, Pablo's brother was distracted. "I had a tour group this morning," he said. "People have come every day this week." It was the second week of January, peak tourist season in Colombia. It also happened to be Roberto's birthday and family members had joined him at the house. His grandson and teenage son kicked a soccer ball around the back yard, just a few feet from the bullet hole-riddled window. His grandson stopped for a second to pose for a "selfie" against a chain-link fence that overlooked the city, the Enrique Olaya Herrera Airport just visible in the background. Elena told me that it was from this same spot that Pablo Escobar once kept watch over outgoing flights loaded with cocaine shipments.

Had you told Garcia, my guide, in 1989 that he would one day have Roberto Escobar's direct number in his cellphone, he wouldn't have believed you. Garcia, 45, grew up in La Estrella, a town on the southern outskirts of Medellín. He dreamed of being a TV reporter but his family couldn't afford to send him to college, so he went down the path taken by many impoverished men in the country: he joined the Colombian National Guard in November 1989. Of the 152 recruits in his class, Garcia said only three are alive today. "The year I joined, five to 10 police officers were killed a day," he said.

Even though Garcia was stationed in Bogotá, the capital city, every police officer during that time period was tasked with a single mission: to go after Pablo Escobar and the men who worked for him. Garcia describes himself as “a survivor of Pablo Escobar,” a title he proudly wears. “Everyone my age was in some way touched by Escobar,” he said.

Pablo Escobar’s death had ushered in a new chapter in Colombia’s violent history – as the drug wars came to a close, the guerrilla wars were ramping up. As a police officer reassigned to Envigado, a Medellín suburb, Garcia now had to contend with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or the FARC, a guerrilla group that waged war against paramilitary groups and the government for control of the country. The FARC benefitted from the break-up of the drug cartels and it provided protection for a new generation of drug producers and traffickers in exchange for financial support.

Garcia and his wife moved to Rhode Island in 2000 to escape the violence that plagued Colombia. He overstayed his tourist visa, working a variety of under the table jobs in factories and as a mechanic, and had two sons, who are now 14 and 8 years old. Although he enjoyed the relative security of life in Rhode Island, he missed his country and his family. In 2009, Garcia decided that it was finally safe enough to return to Colombia.

Today, he works as a guide for Medellín City Services, a tour company that caters to foreigners. Garcia never intended to get into the tourism industry. He was just in need of work and saw a job posting for English-speaking guides. Owner Camilo Uribe describes Garcia as one of the company’s best. “He’s also a witness to the dark days of drug trafficking,” Uribe said. Garcia started out giving a range of tours of Medellín, including gastronomical or architectural excursions and trips to coffee farms outside of

the city, but he now exclusively leads Pablo Escobar tours because they are in such high demand – in large part because of a popular TV show in the U.S.

“‘Narcos’ is free publicity for me,” Garcia repeated over the course of a tour I took with him. “I have to say thank you to Netflix because they gave me free propaganda,” he said. “Narcos” debuted on Netflix in August 2015 and was renewed for a second season within the second week of its launch. It is the first American TV series to chronicle Pablo Escobar’s rise and fall, and has since been extended for third and fourth seasons. Executive Producer Eric Newman said the drama was never exclusively about Escobar. “There’s a reason why we call this show ‘Narcos’ and not ‘Pablo Escobar.’ It’s very much about the trade. There are other drug dealers and there are alliances formed against Pablo, so there are a multitude of stories we could tackle,” he told *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Since the series’ release, Garcia has gone from offering a handful of Pablo Escobar tours a month to multiple tours a week, and sometimes two a day during peak tourist season. Tourists come to Medellín wanting to get a taste of Escobar’s world. The first stop is Monaco, a five-story building where Escobar lived with his family before a bomb attack forced them into hiding. It’s then on to La Catedral, the jail Escobar built for himself in 1991 as part of an agreement with the Colombian government, and from which he escaped only a year later. On his way to Escobar’s grave, Garcia drives by a soccer field that the drug lord built to curry public favor. The final stop is the house where Escobar met his fate.

Garcia doesn't mind spending his days in the presence of Escobar. "This is like free therapy for me because I needed to talk about it," he said. He used to suffer from insomnia and attributes his improved sleep pattern to his ability to speak openly with people about his former life as a police officer.

Daniel Escobar, 26 and no relation to the Escobar crime dynasty, lit a cigarette as he waited for members of his tour group to arrive. Dressed in tight-fitted jeans, a hooded sweatshirt that was too large for his lanky frame and Vans, he could easily pass for a university student rather than a tour company operator. His hair is long and he spent much of the day brushing it from his eyes. Like many in Medellín, working in the tourism industry is simply a means to an end: it allows him to pursue his true passion, music, when he isn't spending his time organizing Pablo Escobar-themed tours.

Escobar never envisioned himself working in the tourism industry – rather he stumbled into it by accident. A friend had started a tour company and needed someone to help with the logistics and management. Escobar needed a job and the work was flexible, exactly what the self-described "artist" was looking for. It also had the potential to be quite lucrative.

Escobar works for Escobar & The Rock, a company that arranges tours to La Manuela, the finca that the drug lord bought for his daughter, the country home's namesake. The tour also stops at El Peñón de Guatapé, a 7,000 ft. rock that overlooks the picturesque town of Guatapé and the surrounding lakes. Tourists had been coming to the area long before La Manuela opened to the public and the company saw an opportunity to

link Pablo Escobar to the already popular tourist spot. Since launching in May 2015, business has only grown: one tour a week turned into three, and they hope to offer even more because the demand is there. “When the ‘Narcos’ series came out, the potential for tourism really grew,” Escobar said, echoing Garcia.

The young guide prefers to remain behind the scenes. He took advantage of any break during the day to quickly light another cigarette and step away from the group. It was up to his friend Alejandro Montoya, 26, to engage everyone and regale them with lively stories and snippets about Pablo Escobar while he busied himself with driving the tour van, ordering lunch and paying entrance fees. Montoya was brought on board to help translate to English because apart from Latin American tourists, few of the foreigners who sign up for these tours speak enough Spanish to follow along. Montoya and Escobar see this as practice for opportunities yet to come. They envision taking foreigners to Hacienda Napoles, one of Pablo Escobar’s former country homes that was converted into an adventure park complete with a zoo and water park. It’s a site that has yet to be tapped by tourism companies catering to international visitors and currently targets Colombian families looking to spend an afternoon in the sun.

“Pablo Escobar was a real world *Scar Face*,” Montoya said. “People are drawn to this lifestyle: riches, power, women. For many people, these things are a definition of success, and foreigners want to see this first-hand.” During his tour of La Manuela, Montoya pointed out that Escobar only smoked marijuana because he didn’t believe in dabbling in the substance from which he profited. He stopped in front of the ruins of the drug lord’s bedroom to single out the thickness of the walls, which muffled sounds from the room – “This is how Pablo hid his prostitutes,” he said with a smirk.

Crime tours are nothing new: there are ones in Chicago, Boston and New York that explore the mobsters that once called these cities home. There are even tours of Los Angeles' gang-controlled neighborhoods and there is a "mob museum" in Las Vegas. Yet, although he is neither the world's first nor last drug lord, Pablo Escobar is undoubtedly the most famous. And his legacy sells like no other, which is why there have been numerous books, TV series and movies dedicated to how he rose from a childhood of poverty to earning a place on *Forbes'* inaugural "World's Billionaires List" – all without finishing high school.

"Other narco-traffickers have had more money, but no one else tried to directly challenge the state, force a constitutional change or try to change laws," said Gustavo Duncan, a political science professor at Universidad EAFIT in Medellín who studies drug trafficking. "He brought the Colombian government to its knees."

It was, in the end, what made him so extraordinary. Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán, the leader of Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, made international headlines when he escaped from prison twice before being extradited to the U.S., but unlike Escobar, he never confronted the Mexican government, threatened a president or ordered a presidential candidate killed. Those moves made Escobar a legend. He had an aura of duality, too – as a villain who terrorized Colombia but also as a self-styled *paisa* Robin Hood – and it contributes to his intrigue, said Duncan. To some, he was a rebel who empowered poor communities by donating soccer fields and building houses in Medellín's slums – to others, he was a brutal kingpin who tried to mask his dark deeds behind acts of public largesse.

Netflix has partnered with Univision to release the Spanish-language cable network's "El Chapo" series after it wraps up its first season, which premiered in April. In the same vein as "Narcos," the series chronicles the rise and fall of Mexico's best-known drug lord. Yet when asked whether there would ever be "El Chapo" tours in Mexico, Duncan laughed. He said it's too early to tell, but cautioned that no one compares to Escobar: "No one else has confronted the state in as extreme of a way as him. No one knows what will happen in the future, but so far, there's been no one else like Pablo Escobar."

Montoya and Escobar's desire to grow their company has no limits in Medellín. The city is full of sites associated with Pablo Escobar that have yet to be integrated into existing tours. There's the nightclub he frequented that sits high above the city. There's Avenida San Juan, where you could once spy him walking around in broad daylight. There are the cemeteries where his *sicarios*, or hit men, are buried. And then there's the neighborhood, Barrio Escobar, which bears his name and is home to the children and grandchildren of his *sicarios*, and where many residents continue to view him as a national hero. In several parts of the city you'd be hard pressed not to find a building or a road that didn't have some sort of connection to Medellín's most famous resident. The opportunities for an ingenious young guide to profit off of his legacy are endless.

And the possibilities aren't confined to the city's limits. Pablo Escobar's hometown of Rionegro, where he spent the first eight years of his life, is less than an hour drive from Medellín's city center and his fincas dot the green mountainsides outside the city.

A now defunct tour even started in the capital of Bogotá, and took tourists to the Police Museum and then to Escobar's former properties. Bogotá was not immune to the death and destruction caused by car bombs – Escobar's trademark tool of terror – and the city is full of sites targeted by the Medellín Cartel. The tour could have easily gone to Centro Comercial 93, where a car bomb exploded in front of the mall in April 1993, killing 15 people and wounding more than 100; the Administrative Department of Security (DAS) headquarters, which was the target of a Escobar-ordered truck bomb in December 1989; or the Palace of Justice, which was attacked by guerrillas financed by Escobar in November 1985, resulting in the death of half of the country's Supreme Court Justices. If you look closely enough, you can still see bullet holes on the palace's exterior walls.

Even in Cartagena, the resort city on Colombia's Caribbean coast and the country's most popular tourist destination – where the appeal lies in the yellow colonial walls encircling the historic center, the bougainvillea-covered balconies, bars that never seem to close and miles of beaches – Pablo Escobar is still present. His face is on t-shirt after t-shirt street vendors hawk to tourists. There's one with the image of his government-issued ID card and another with a grainy photo of his face under which the words "El Patrón" (the Boss) are inked in bold red lettering.

"Only the foreigners buy these things," said Julio Rodríguez, 47, a Cartagena native, who hawks the Escobar memorabilia to visitors. Escobar-themed t-shirts are one of his top sellers, even more so in recent years. He doesn't mind selling them since the demand is there, and he is grateful for the steady source of income that tourism brings to his family. Escobar's effect on this city was felt not by car bombings but by the absence

of travelers, both Colombians and foreigners alike. Before Cartagena became the “it” Caribbean destination, it was a poor port city and Rodríguez worked as a fisherman to support his family – work that was difficult and not nearly as consistent as working as a street vendor, especially during the peak season when Cartagena’s cobblestone streets are packed with travelers who are more than willing to drop \$10 on a t-shirt.

Yet not everyone in Colombia appreciates the revenue Pablo Escobar tourism generates and the Medellín Convention & Visitors Bureau purposely does not mention the tours on its website.

In 2016, Colombia received more than 2.5 million foreign visitors, according to the Colombian Ministry of Trade, which marked a 13 percent increase from the year before. More than half a million of these visitors were from the U.S., and Medellín is the fastest growing tourist destination in Colombia after Bogotá. Tourism to Colombia is only expected to increase as the country enters a new era of peace now that the Western Hemisphere’s longest-running war is coming to an end. President Juan Manuel Santos signed a peace deal with the FARC in November 2016 and he has pledged to grow tourism in post-conflict Colombia.

Today, there is criticism inside Colombia about the way the country is viewed by outsiders. Colombian television critic Ómar Rincón has called “Narcos” “an ode to the stereotype NarColombia” that caters to “gringos in Miami.” He said the show promotes an image of a country where money equates access to drugs, women and a lavish lifestyle.

And it is this stereotype that has made Medellín a mecca of drug tourism. It is next to impossible to not encounter cocaine sellers in Parque Lleras, the nightlife area that is home to more than half of the city's hostels. "Do you want cocaine?" street vendors loudly whisper as tourists walk by. "How about marijuana?" they continue if the first question isn't enough to provoke a response. The heavy police presence in the area does nothing to deter them, and the police seem to turn a blind eye – it's no secret that Parque Lleras is the place to come for foreigners looking to try the white powder that made Colombia infamous. Colombia still exports more than 60 percent of the world's cocaine, and tourists are drawn to trying the product at its source, especially when it's a tenth of its price stateside: a gram of decent-quality cocaine bought on the street of Medellín is only \$6.

In March, U.S. rapper Wiz Khalifa angered Colombians after posting photos of his visit to Pablo Escobar's grave on social media. There was a close-up shot of the grave adorned with colorful flowers laid by the drug lord's devoted followers, a rolled joint barely visible next to the petals – and Khalifa captioned the image with an emoji of a gift. Another photo showed him smoking a blunt in the graveyard, framed by Medellín's skyline in the background. Medellín's Mayor Federico Gutiérrez told a *BBC* reporter that Khalifa's photos only promote crime. "It shows that this guy has never had to suffer from the violence inflicted by these drug traffickers," he said.

But Garcia, the hard working tour guide, doesn't believe Pablo Escobar-themed tours and the publicity are damaging to the country's international image. "In my mind, they're a good thing because they can set the record straight about Pablo Escobar," he said. "He's part of the history of Medellín and of Colombia and I don't glorify him – he's

simply part of our history. The U.S. has Al Capone and Germany has Hitler, and we have Pablo.”

Garcia also views the tours as little more than a business deal. “People choose to give me their money,” he said. “They pay me and I tell my story, and they can leave a review online.” A private tour costs \$85 a person or \$44 a person for a group tour. Garcia pockets half of these profits, in addition to any tips he receives. It’s a good salary for someone without a college degree. “I make money on Pablo Escobar’s name. All the things I have are thanks to that guy,” he said. He owns his own house in Itagüí, a suburb of Medellín, has just purchased a new car and can afford to send his sons to private school.

I ask Garcia if he finds it strange to spend his days in the presence of Roberto Escobar. “I try to forget what happened,” he said. “If we want peace, we have to do this.”

For many Colombians, the possibility of peace after decades of conflict requires that they forgive those who inflicted terror on their family, friends and country. Garcia offered that he can forgive Roberto Escobar because, as far as he knows, he never directly handed down orders to kill people; he simply got roped into the drug business by being related to Pablo Escobar. Unlike other members of the Medellín Cartel, Roberto willingly surrendered to authorities after his brother’s death. And since 1993, the old man has lived under the constant threat of death at the hands of those who have not been able to forgive him for his involvement with an organization that terrorized their city and country.

While Garcia can find forgiveness for Roberto Escobar through these details, he cannot forgive Roberto's brother. Garcia's only consolation is that he outlived the man who was responsible for the death of hundreds of Colombian police officers.

"Pablo, I survived your war," he said during the tour and while standing over the drug lord's grave. "I'm making a living off of you, and you're dead and gone so I've won."

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