



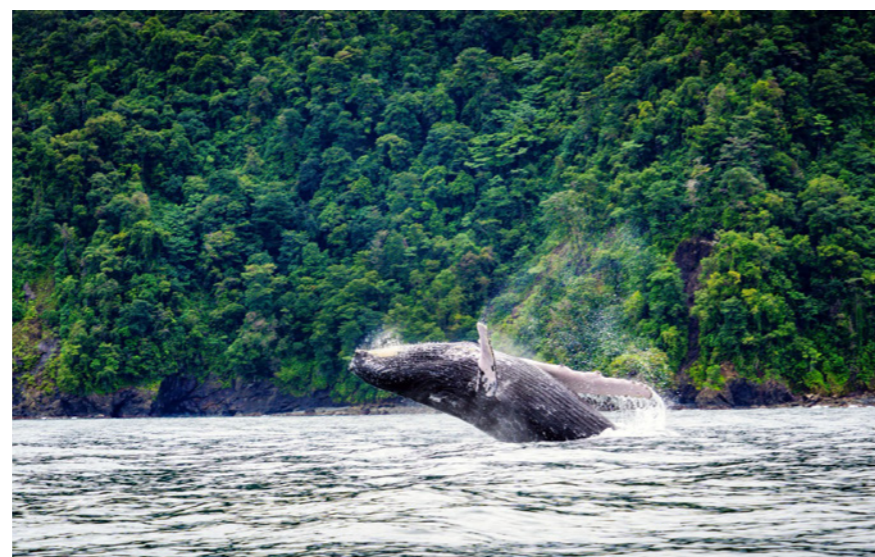
L to R: Ahmed Al-Khateeb, Saudi Minister of Tourism; Zurab Pololikashvili, Secretary-General UN World Tourism; Gustavo Petro, President of Colombia; Luis Carlos Reyes Hernandez, Colombian Minister of Commerce, Industry & Tourism; Dumek Turbay, Mayor of Cartagena

## UN TOURISM ON THE MOVE: INVESTMENTS, INNOVATION, RECOVERY & GROWTH

As global tourism continues its recovery, attention has turned to ensuring that the sector not only rebounds but evolves with sustainability, innovation, and strategic investments at its core. The 122nd Session of the UN Tourism Executive Council, held in Cartagena, Colombia, exemplified this forward-thinking approach, with representatives from 47 countries, including 21 Ministers of Tourism, alongside key stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, and international finance. The meeting underscored tourism's potential to transform economies, create jobs, and preserve cultural heritage. UN Tourism Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili highlighted the vital role of tourism in Colombia's development, noting, "Colombia has chosen to invest in tourism, not in weapons or war, and as the only country to have hosted every major UN Tourism event, it is a testament to the power of tourism as a force for change." This emphasis on investment was a central theme of the session, with discussions focusing on how tourism can drive economic growth, foster sustainability, and enhance community welfare. Recent UN Tourism data shows that global tourism is on track to reach 96% of pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2024, a clear indicator of the sector's resilience. The rise in foreign direct investment (FDI) in tourism projects supports this optimism. The latest FDI Tourism Investment Report

2024 reveals that nearly 2,000 FDI projects were announced between 2019 and 2023, generating an estimated \$106.7 billion in capital investment and creating over 259,000 jobs. Despite the lingering effects of the pan-

demic, these investments reflect a growing confidence in tourism's long-term potential. The recovery, however, is not uniform across regions. Europe continues to lead, attracting nearly half of global tourism-related FDI, with



A majestic whale breaches off the coast of Nuquí, Chocó.



Celebrating cultural heritage through traditional dance in Acandí, Chocó.

Latin America and the Caribbean emerging as strong contenders. The region has seen a surge in tourism investments, driven by its ability to attract international tourists and its growing infrastructure. Asia-Pacific has also experienced a notable rebound, with a 125% increase in capital investment from 2022 to 2023. In contrast, the Middle East and Africa are witnessing steady, though more modest, growth, particularly in destination projects

aimed at attracting international visitors. Amid this backdrop of regional disparities, Colombia stands out as a model of how tourism-driven investments can reshape economies. The country has invested over \$1 billion in tourism projects between 2018 and 2023, making it the second-largest destination for tourism FDI in Latin America. This influx of capital has not only bolstered Colombia's tourism infrastructure but

also created over 4,700 jobs, particularly benefiting rural areas, women, and youth. UN Tourism Executive Director Natalia Bayona remarked, "More investments and greater innovation are essential to take tourism to the next level. They can unlock many new opportunities for businesses, create jobs, and build greater resilience and inclusivity. Colombia shines as a top example of how investment in tourism really delivers, not least for rural communities, for women, youth, and post-conflict societies." This commitment to inclusive and sustainable growth aligns with the goals of CAF – Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, which has supported several initiatives aimed at strengthening the region's tourism sector. Innovation is central to the transformation of global tourism. The UN Tourism Executive Council has emphasized innovation as a key driver, highlighted by the launch of the "Tourism Doing Business: Investing in Colombia" guidelines, which aim to attract more investors. Digital transformation, particularly through AI and blockchain, is also a focal point, enhancing destination manage-



The Secretary General, Zurab Pololikashvili successfully steered the organization through COVID back to today's current recovery.



ment and visitor experiences. This technological shift is crucial for building more sustainable and resilient tourism ecosystems. The importance of innovation was further emphasized during the Innovation in Green Projects Challenge, held in conjunction with CAF, which attracted over 500 entrepreneurial ideas from across Latin America and the Caribbean. The winning initiative, Natoure from Mexico, focuses on nature conservation through innovative tourism practices. Such projects reflect a growing recognition that sustainability and innovation are critical to shaping the tourism of tomorrow. Looking ahead, the UN Tourism Secretary-General stressed that targeted investments are key to achieving a sustainable and inclusive future. “The rise of new technologies and the need for greater sustainability are constantly impacting the tourism sector, presenting both opportunities and challenges that call for innovative approaches,” Pololikashvili said. “More and better-targeted investment will be key to transforming the tourism sector, creating jobs, and driving inclusive and sustainable growth.” As the sector continues to evolve, the 2024 FDI



As a native Colombian, UN Tourism Executive Director Natalia Bayona was enthusiastic to host the global event in Colombia.

Tourism Investment Report advocates for a shift toward quality over quantity in tourism investments. Sustainable growth will require diversification, eco-friendly policies, and the development of infrastructure that supports long-term prosperity. By focusing on these principles, the tourism sector has the potential to be a powerful force for economic development, cultural preservation,

and environmental stewardship. As the discussions in Cartagena made clear, collaboration between the public and private sectors, along with strategic investments in innovation and sustainability, will shape the future of tourism. By continuing to adapt to the changing global landscape, tourism can become a central pillar of global economic and social transformation. ●



Bogota is a booming city in the region and attractive for international guests.



**LUIS CARLOS REYES HERNÁNDEZ**  
Colombian Minister of Commerce, Industry & Tourism

## COLOMBIA: MANAGING GROWTH & SUSTAINABILITY

### The Importance of Innovation & Investment in Tourism

#### How has Colombia rebranded itself?

Colombia’s success has stemmed from persistently showcasing our country’s strengths. The peace process, which attracted global attention, highlighted not just peace but also critical issues like biodiversity, climate change, and geopolitics, offering a unique Global South perspective. This has fueled interest, shaping our tourism strategy.

While Cartagena is a major destination, we’re also focusing on lesser-known areas like the Pacific coast, La Guajira, and the Amazon. These regions, central to our tourism strategy, offer unique experiences. Our approach targets increasing visitors to underdeveloped areas through sustainable community tourism to help diversify the sector.



#### How can the government address the importance of shifting away from fossil fuels to tourism?

Tourism is crucial to Colombia’s economic future. Unlike countries heavily reliant on tourism, Colombia has even greater income potential. As the world moves away from carbon-based economies, Saudi Arabia’s rapid transformation into a major tourism destination serves as an example. With our rich ecosystems, Colombia has the opportunity to lead this transition.

#### How is the government advancing sustainable community tourism in underdeveloped areas?

Strengthening community tourism starts with engaging local communities and providing essential support. The National Tourism Fund finances infrastructure projects in tourism-rich but underserved areas, addressing needs like energy, health centers, and clean water. Credit lines help homeowners adapt properties for tourism, while basic hospitality training ensures visitors enjoy comfortable stays. Continuous dialogue with communities is key to fostering sustainable tourism.

#### What is the government’s tourism target for the next two years?

Colombia’s tourism sector has immense growth potential. Starting with 4 million foreign visitors, the goal is to reach 7 million soon, with even greater long-term targets inspired by countries like Spain, which attract tens of millions annually.

#### What is your assessment of the current coffee market, given rising prices & droughts in major markets like Brazil & Colombia?

While rising coffee prices benefit Colombian producers, our priority is building an industrial policy to add value locally, such as packaging and coffee capsule production. This ensures more export profits stay in Colombia, aligning with our broader goal of increasing income for the country’s most vulnerable populations. ●



Eco-tourism is a big draw in Colombia.





**CARMEN CABALLERO VILLA**

President, ProColombia

**What is ProColombia & its role in the country?**

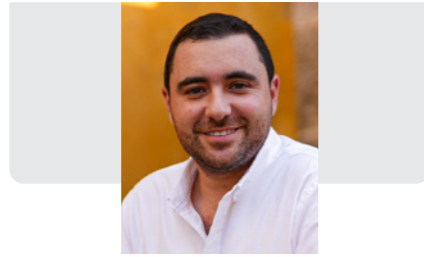
ProColombia is the country's national promotion agency responsible for attracting foreign investment, boosting exports, and promoting tourism. With 24 offices worldwide, ProColombia organizes trade fairs and business roundtables to connect buyers and sellers, enhancing Colombia's global presence and economic growth in these sectors.

**How can you stand out in the region with your tourism offer?**

Our current focus is on promoting unique projects like Magdalena River cruises, which differentiate Colombia from other Caribbean destinations. One starting in Cartagena and the other in Barranquilla, crossing paths over seven days. These cruises, resembling flatboats, will highlight Gabriel García Márquez's literary legacy, nature tourism, and community involvement.

**Why is Colombia an attractive investment destination?**

Colombia offers unique advantages, including a skilled workforce, favorable tax incentives, and access to free trade zones. Key sectors like renewable energy, aerospace, and tourism provide investment opportunities. With government initiatives and connectivity improvements, Colombia is positioned as a prime location for foreign investment.



**YAMIL ARANA PADAÚI**

Governor of Bolívar

**What makes Bolívar unique, & why should people visit?**

Bolívar stands out with three UNESCO World Heritage towns—Palenque, Mompox, and Cartagena—and offers diverse landscapes, from beaches in Barú to the cooler mountain regions of Montes de María. Rich in cultural diversity and historical significance, Bolívar is also enhancing tourism with plans for a modern river cruise along the Magdalena River.

**What incentives does the government offer to attract foreign investment?**

The strategic location of the Port of Cartagena drives investment through the "Diamante Bolívar" program, offering tax exemptions and guaranteed access to 24-hour potable water for companies within a 36-kilometer radius. Infrastructure improvements and tax incentives are attracting major investments, like Kampak's potential \$250 million investment.

**Are you concerned how mass tourism might harm the environment?**

We aim to attract high-quality, sustainable tourists. Targeting luxury cruise ships, we focus on tourists who respect the environment and culture. We're also collaborating with local authorities to prevent issues like sexual tourism, particularly in municipalities where the cruises dock.



**ANDRÉS SANTAMARÍA GARRIDO**

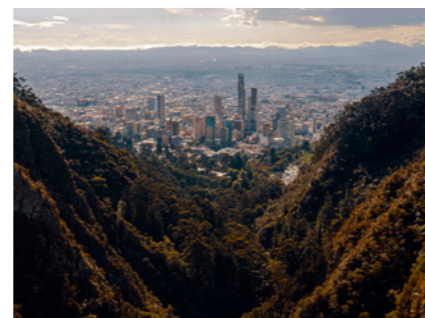
Director, Tourism Bogota

**What are the key elements driving Bogotá's tourism strategy?**

Bogotá's tourism strategy focuses on its vibrant gastronomy, cultural offerings, and business tourism. The city is positioning itself as an international destination with initiatives like the "Bogotá, Your Home" slogan. We also have over 15,000 restaurants and a rich cultural scene, hosting global music acts and festivals, making the city an attractive destination for international visitors.

In addition to food, Bogotá plays a crucial role in the cultural and entertainment sectors. The city now hosts over 40 concerts weekly, and in the upcoming year, some of the biggest global music acts, including Taylor Swift, will be performing in Bogotá. The city's festivals also attract significant numbers of international visitors, with about 30% of festival attendees coming from abroad. One of the most prominent music events is Estéreo Picnic, a private festival that has drawn nearly 600,000 attendees, of which 30% are international.

Bogotá aims to further enhance its cultural offerings, including the return of the International Theater Festival, which is expected to take place during Easter.



# FACES OF CHANGE

Leaders Making a Difference in Colombia



**MARÍA CLAUDIA LACOUTURE**

President, American Colombian Chamber of Commerce

**Describe Colombia's workforce?**

Colombia offers a skilled workforce with strong managerial and technical capabilities with a well-rounded education system, including university and technical training, with government-backed programs like SENA providing tailored employee training.

**Compare Colombia to other Latin American countries for investment opportunities?**

Colombia remains highly competitive due to its lower labor costs, with salaries 47% lower than in northern Mexico. Despite fiscal challenges, its political stability, diverse sectors like agriculture, healthcare, and technology make it an attractive investment destination.



**ÓSCAR RUEDA GARCÍA**

Director of Sustainable Tourism CAF

**CAF is driving numerous projects in Colombia. However, timelines tend to be longer compared to private banks.**

This is due to the nature of our requirements, not inefficiency. Private banks focus on verifying the borrower's ability to repay. CAF is a multilateral development bank and requires proof that projects generate positive sustainable impacts. We support projects from their early stages to ensure they meet standards, which naturally extends the process. CAF continues to provide technical assistance and oversight to ensure commitments are fulfilled. This approach transforms our work into a sustainable investment program rather than a simple credit operation.



**JUAN GARZÓN**

Co-Chief Executive Officer, SENZA CLUB

**What sets SENZA CLUB apart?**

We merge extreme sports, rural community development, and advanced technology to create a unique tourism model. We don't just promote travel; we build sustainable ecosystems that empower remote areas.

**What challenges has SENZA faced?**

Operating in remote rural areas poses logistical and connectivity challenges. We overcome these with innovative technology and strong local partnerships. By fostering trust within communities and tailoring solutions to their needs, we've turned obstacles into opportunities, creating impactful, sustainable systems that benefit both residents and the global tourism industry.



**VALENTINA CORTÉS**

Sustainable Habitat

**How does Sustainable Habitat empower communities?**

We place them at the forefront of tourism. We empower women and youth, preserve cultural heritage, and generate sustainable economic opportunities. Ethno-tourists engage in meaningful exchanges, ensuring tourism becomes a tool for cultural preservation, community strengthening, and regenerative development in harmony with tradition.

**What role does design thinking play in your tourism model?**

Design thinking drives our collaborative approach, enabling us to craft a tourism model that meets community needs. By involving Indigenous voices at every step, we create experiences where visitors contribute positively to the territory.

