



Primavera en Colombia: Internship and master's thesis at SEI

I conducted a combined internship and master's thesis project at SEI Latin America in Bogotá, Colombia.

Before arrival

I applied for the field studies travel grant because I wanted to go abroad for my master's thesis. More specifically, I wanted to challenge myself and explore a culture and context different from home. Furthermore, I did a minor field study in the spring of 2023 and had a really good experience, so that inspired me to try for another one. I found my project through an ad on KTH's website, so I didn't build it myself. What opted me to apply was partly the structure. Being a combined internship and thesis project, I thought it could be an interesting work experience. Additionally, I was interested in SEI as an organization. Lastly, I was curious on Colombia and Latin America. I had wanted to go to Latin America for quite some time, so I saw this as my chance.

My expectations before arrival were mainly to deepen my knowledge on sustainability, environmental governance and the development context in the region. I also expected to improve my Spanish. Other than that, I didn't have that many expectations. I tried to keep an open mind, knowing that some aspects of the experience were probably going to be challenging.

Preparation wise, it was not too much work. I didn't take any Spanish course, but I had taken classes in high school. Being a few years ago, I knew this was going to be difficult, but I decided to take on the challenge. I practiced a bit at home two months ahead of departure and it turned out to be enough to get around. Moreover, I had to get vaccinated ahead of time. I started that process two months before departure. I didn't need any visa, as you can stay 90 days (180 days if you prolong it) as a tourist without any permit.

Upon arrival

I arrived three days before my internship started, to get accustomed to the time difference and to get settled. When I arrived in the office, I was welcomed by my local supervisor Cláudia. She also brought me to explore the city the weekend after. Other than that, I started working on my project and with the internship tasks right away. Initially, the idea was for me to join in on a field trip to the Amazon for SEI project work, to conduct interviews for my thesis. In the end, the field work was postponed to after my stay in Colombia. This was a disappointment, but I still had tasks that I needed to do in Bogotá.

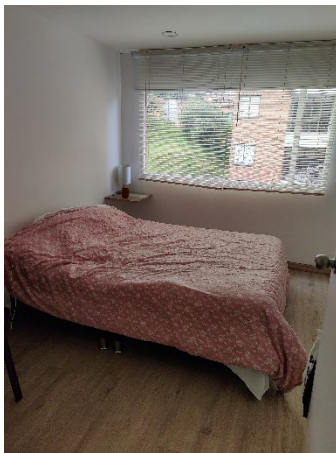
Financials

Colombia is generally less expensive than Sweden. Costs for food, (especially fruits and vegetables), transport, gyms and services are for the most part lower. For example, my gym subscription costed me about 100 kr a month and an avocado costed me about 5-10 kr. Clothes and shoes were the same price

as in Sweden, but second hand was cheaper. The grant covered the flight to and from Bogotá, and CSN covered my everyday expenses. Overall, I spent less money than I do in Sweden, even though I had a more comfortable lifestyle.

Accommodation

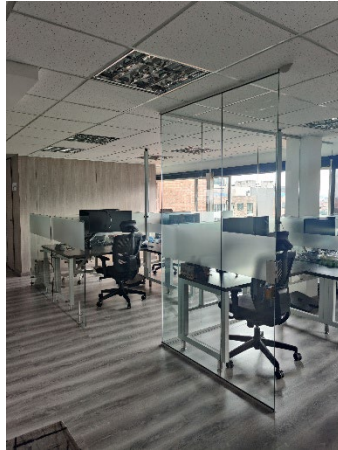
I lived together with two other girls from KTH, who were also doing a combined internship and thesis project at SEI. They found our apartment on Airbnb and had help from a friend, a Colombian girl who had done an exchange at KTH the previous semester, in finding a good neighbourhood. We lived in an area called Zona G and paid around 12 000 kr a month for the whole apartment. We were really happy with our accommodation and neighbourhood; it was close to work (20 min walking distance), it had all the basic amenities, and it was located close to restaurants, cafés, grocery stores and gyms. Basically, everything we needed or wanted in our everyday life. However, you can definitely find something more inexpensive if you want to. If you cannot find anything on Airbnb, check with CompartoApto.



Project

As mentioned previously, I did a combined internship and thesis project. The idea was that my thesis would be coordinated and done alongside a project on water governance. However, the project didn't get funded in time, so we had to restructure the internship to focus more on another project. In the end, I followed two projects: One was in the development phase and focused on water governance in Southeast Brazil. The other project was in the implementation phase and focused on evaluating environmental projects in the Amazon. The idea with this structure was to learn about project development, implementation and the discrepancy between the two. My local supervisor and I then agreed that my thesis could focus on implementation challenges in environmental projects in the Brazilian Amazon, considering the focus of one of the projects as well as the internship.

A typical day began with a walk to the office. I usually spent the morning working on internship-related tasks connected to the two main projects—often accompanied by plenty of coffee. Around midday, I had lunch with my colleagues. I usually brought my own lunch, though sometimes we went out to eat; lunch in Bogotá is generally quite affordable, typically around 50–75 kr. In the afternoons, I focused on my thesis work. I initially divided my time evenly—50% on internship duties and 50% on thesis writing—which worked well at first. However, as the project progressed, I gradually shifted more time toward my thesis. After work, I would usually go to the gym or to a dance class. I then met with my roomies at home, cooked dinner, worked some more on my thesis and then called it a day. In the end of my internship, I gave a presentation of my work to my colleagues. The idea is now to share my results with SEI through a policy brief.



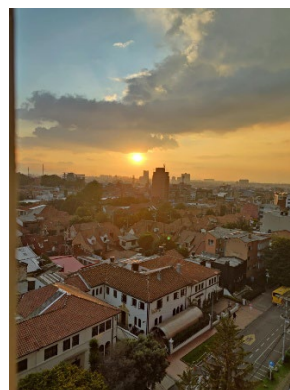
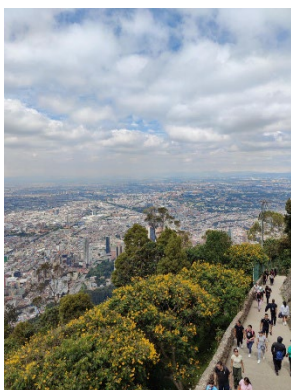
Picture to the right: Me and my supervisor Cláudia <3

Country

I very much enjoyed my experience in Colombia. It's a country rich in culture, dance and music, which I appreciated a lot. Additionally, there is a large variety in nature, people, and culture within the country. It's also interesting how historical occurrences, such as conflict and colonialism, have a legacy in the country today.

When first arriving in Bogotá, I didn't know how cautious to be with personal safety. The first few weeks, I was often a bit on guard when out on the streets, especially in neighbourhoods I didn't know. However, after a while, I felt a lot more comfortable and confident. The safety aspect is, nevertheless, something you always must consider when in Colombia. After dark, I often took an Uber. However, if I was in company, I often felt safe walking. It's very much a question of when and where, and you get a good gut feeling after a while.

Language was at times a bit challenging. With my school Spanish, I was able to follow most conversations, and I was able to get around really well. However, most social interactions at work, like lunch, were in Spanish. Usually, conversations were going at a fast pace and included a lot of slang. This made it difficult to fully engage, and it took a lot of effort to just keep up. I got a lot better with time, but it was challenging.



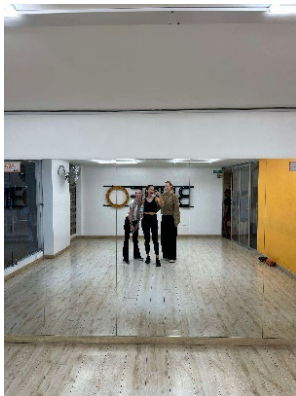
Leisure and social activities

Bogotá has a great offer when it comes to culture, social activities and recreation. I enjoy dancing, so I took some classes in salsa and bachata. I also went to salsa clubs a few times for social dancing. I enjoy physical activity in general, so I joined a gym and went there a few times a week. I also went running in the city once a week. On Sundays, there is a thing called *la ciclovía*. The main roads in the city are closed for cars between 7 AM and 2 PM to leave room for bikers, runners and other recreational use. I love this concept, and I used the *ciclovía* every week. Other than dancing and working out, me and my

roomies went to museums, fruit markets, food festivals, second hand markets, coffee places and restaurants.

I also went on two trips while in Colombia. I had some friends visiting from Sweden for two weeks, and we went on vacation to *San Andrés* together. *San Andrés* is a Colombian island in the Caribbean, with great beaches and beautiful nature. During Easter, me and my roomies went to the coffee region of Colombia, *Eje Cafetero*. This is a beautiful area, very lush and mountainous. We went hiking in the national park *Valle de Cocora*, visited the hot springs *Termales Santa Rosa de Cabal*, walked around the cute towns of *Salento* and *Filandia* and did a tour on a coffee farm. This trip was also amazing, and I highly recommend both destinations.

Getting to know people in Bogotá was easy. Colombians are generally social and outgoing, which made it easy to connect. Having a workplace and colleagues during my field studies also provided a great opportunity to build relationships. Me and my roomies also met some girls from the Swedish embassy, whom we spent some time with. Through them, we had the chance to meet more Colombians.



Sustainability

In my everyday life, I tried to live sustainably. However, when travelling to Colombia and within the country, I mostly flew. Domestic flights are sometimes the only reasonable option when considering infrastructure and security. Yet, it's too bad that I flew several times. However, when travelling back from Eje Cafetero, me and my roomies were able to take a bus. It felt very safe and well organized, so buses are an option in some regions. In my everyday life I tried to eat locally produced food, walk whenever possible and limit my general consumption.

My project mainly connects to SDGs 13 and 15, as it focuses on the improving environmental governance in the Amazon, to protect ecosystems and contribute to resilience towards climate change. However, the project also contributes to some targets mentioned in other SDGs. For example, the project highlights the importance of empowering and recognizing indigenous groups, which is covered in SDG 10.

Other recommendations and observations

I had a really good experience in Colombia, and I highly recommend anyone who is considering travelling there to do it. I also recommend doing field work in general. You get the opportunity to explore a new culture, deepen your knowledge on sustainability and exchange perspectives with new people. You practice a lot of problem solving and you face challenging situations.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me through sofia.herjevik@gmail.com. I will be happy to help you with any type of advice. Big or small.

To some recommendations:

- Join the Facebook group “Svenskar I Colombia”
- It’s good to have some basic level of Spanish if you travel by yourself. A lot of Colombians don’t know English or have very limited knowledge in the language.
- Take part in the dance culture, it’s so much fun and such an important part of Colombia. If you want to do social dancing in Bogotá, try out “Salsa camará” or “Galería Café Libro”. If you want to do dance classes, try out “Bureo Dance Studio”. One class costs about 80 kr.

Lastly, there is great coffee in Bogotá and Colombia. If you enjoy coffee, try out

- Libertario Coffee Roasters
- Café Cultor
- Tropicália Coffee
- Coffee tours (me and my roomies did a great tour outside of Salento called “Coffee Tour Luger”)

Saludos,

Sofia