

Colombia travel journal

Daniel Hodgson

This whole adventure began in early July 2023 when our professor, Stefan Hallström, introduced the Pacífico Econavipesca project. At the time, the opportunity seemed surreal and a perfect way to conclude my studies. I had previously been on an exchange semester to the Netherlands and was more than pleased with the experience. So, an opportunity to travel to Colombia to participate in a project that could potentially bring real change to people's lives and standards of living was an easy decision. I didn't see this solely as an academic opportunity but also as a cultural adventure. Though I didn't know much about Colombia, I was eager to learn firsthand. It was a chance to travel halfway across the planet for an experience I had never even dreamed of.

A lot of meticulous planning and behind-the-scenes work went into organizing our trip. Throughout the autumn, we set up meetings with our colleagues in Colombia, battling time zones to share information. Once we were briefed on the project, the excitement only grew. It became the sole topic Christian and I discussed, and our enthusiasm skyrocketed.



Figure 1. Flying over the snowy mountains of Greenland

The Pacífico Econavipesca project focuses on co-creating a sustainable artisanal fishing pattern to reduce the negative impacts on the ecosystem in Guapi, a small village on Colombia's Pacific coast. Fortunately, KTH and Sweden are involved in this project through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, which helps finance it. To align our involvement with our studies, we would be participating in designing the fishing vessel. From day one, I saw this as an opportunity to enhance my education with practical experience. As an aspiring engineer, understanding both the practical and theoretical limitations in design is crucial. Throughout my education, I have felt the practical element was lacking, so this project would truly be the final piece of the puzzle.

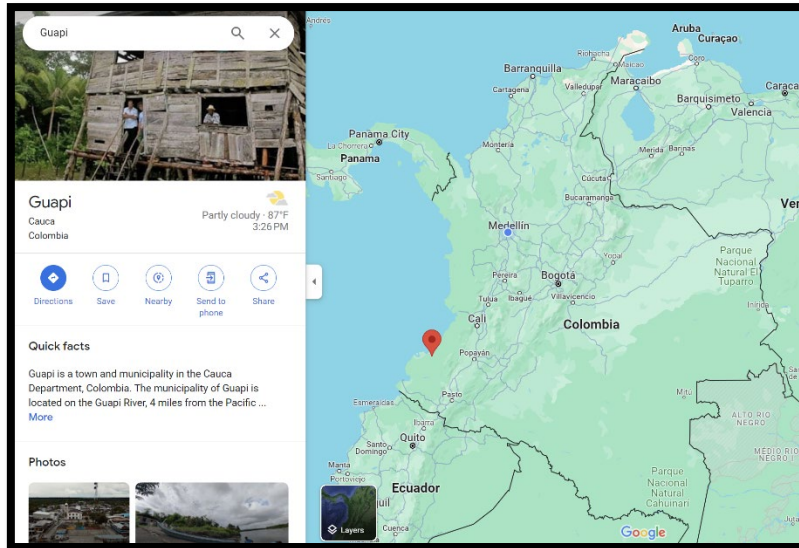


Figure 2. Location of Guapi

By late November, most of the administrative work was completed, and the reality of making this happen truly set in. We would be traveling and living in Medellin for two months, which would also include a trip to Guapi. In late January 2024, the journey became real. After a gruelling 22-hour travel from Stockholm, Sweden, with a layover in Helsinki and then rushing through Miami airport, I finally touched down in Medellin, Colombia. Here, the reality struck me: the language barrier would be significant in our day-to-day life. My Spanish was rusty, and it was clear that English was not commonly spoken. Exhausted from the long flight, it was time to find our apartment.



Figure 3. The view from our apartment in Medellin at night

We had been advised not to take a taxi to our apartment as Medellin taxi drivers were notorious for being unfriendly to tourists. Instead, we opted for the safer choice of Uber. During the hour-long ride to the apartment, we were surrounded by police sirens and blue lights monitoring the traditional Thursday street races in the outskirts of the city. Fortunately, after that event, we had a few calm days. We met up with Julian, the previous team leader of

the project, who taught us the ins and outs of Medellin. He treated us to some local coffee, grabbed a local beer, and gave us a tour around the city. The city felt like it had been entangled with a jungle, with nature, heat, and humidity all in one. The consistent characteristic of the city of eternal spring, also known as Medellin.

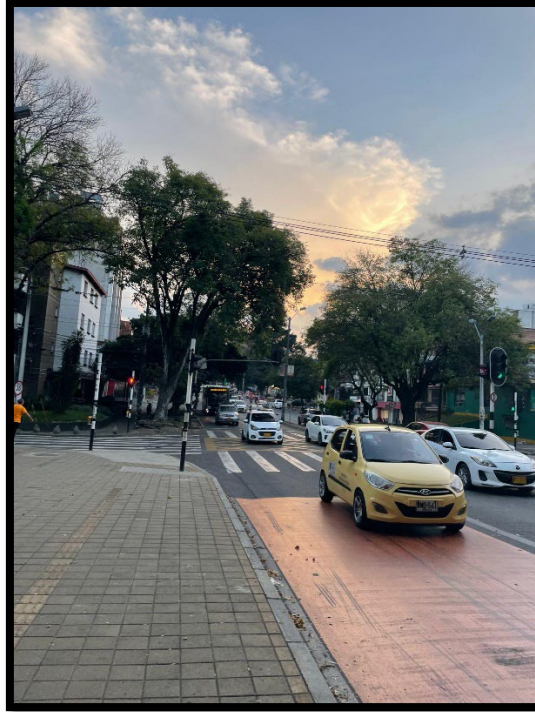


Figure 4. A typical street in Medellin

In the following days, we familiarized ourselves with our neighbourhood and finally met in person with part of the team in Medellin: Camillo and Diana. We saw the beauties of the campus of the National University Faculty of Mines. A vibrant and colourful campus with fruit hanging from the trees and an iguana known to steal bananas if you came too close. Diana insisted that Camillo take us to the central campus for a tour, which we, of course, could not refuse. To get there, we took a local bus called a Coonatra. It felt like a rollercoaster as we travelled to the eastern district of the city where the central campus was located. It was unclear if the campus was within a jungle or not, as the number of trees and vast amount of nature outnumbered anything in its surroundings by dozens. There was even an entire farm engulfed in the campus. Besides that, the campus had the same aura as an American university seen in a 90's film. After all these tours, our true work actually began.

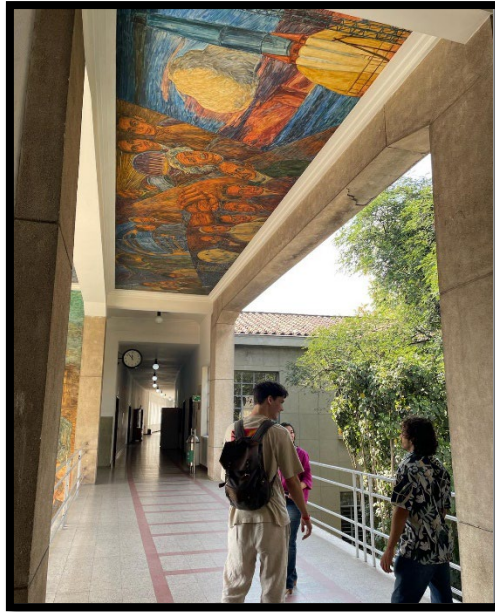


Figure 5. A colourful hallway in the Faculty of Mines during our initial tour

In the first two weeks, we introduced the ideas we had curiously pondered in the weeks before our travels. All surrounding the presented dilemmas regarding the stability of the vessel. With ideas from outriggers to swing keels, we roughly conceptualized designs and bonded with our co-workers through the language of engineering. Luckily for us, they spoke English. Though they did try and sneak in some Spanish words here and there to teach us a word or two. Throughout these weeks, we also helped theoretically optimize the propeller diameter and dimension a rudder with common rules of thumb.



Figure 6. Our work office

All this work prepared us for our upcoming trip to Guapi, where we would be accompanied and reunited once again with Stefan for a few days. Guapi was the peak of this adventure, the

pinnacle of the project. The trip to Guapi started early in the morning with a quick layover in Cali, another infamous city of Colombia. Then the final destination of Guapi awaited us. Upon arrival, we realized that we would now be surrounded by permanent humid and sticky air with no other solution than to just get used to it. The trip to Guapi was a hectic visit, meeting with three different groups of fishermen to gather their insights on our concepts, VR presentations, and a tour of the river where our vessel would one day sail.



Figure 7. The runway of Guapi airport

The trip to Guapi truly made one understand the importance of the project's co-creation. The fishermen, especially Sebastian and Frigerio, showed us their genuine passion for the project and its participants. They were incredibly friendly and helpful, but most importantly, they exemplified the unity and strength of their entire community. The community of Guapi has been subjected to pity from previous attempts at collaboration. Guapi may be a remote village in rural Colombia, but they refuse to be defined by pity. Their society thrives on practical cooperation between citizens, which contrasts with the more individualistic nature of urban life. Each citizen has a clear way of contributing to the community. This is noticed at first glance in Guapi and is inherently beautiful. The village has a strong sense of community, something impossible to understand without experiencing it. There is value in each individual's work. Even though this project tries to promote the specific value of fishermen and the tough conditions they work in, it is noted that every individual in Guapi is in the same situation and that this project only scratches the surface.



Figure 8. Activities during our Guapi trip

After our Guapi trip and return to Medellin, our lives calmed down slightly, and the pressure we felt lifted somewhat. We still spent most of our time in the office conceptualizing and designing a fishing vessel with our new insights from the Guapi trip. But we also started to explore Medellin a bit more. We tried to go on weekly hikes and excursions with our supervisor Samuel and his girlfriend. Being the host he is, he planned hikes to waterfalls, a trip to Guatapé (a town known for its major tourist attraction, El Peñón de Guatapé, a rock that visitors can climb), and also introduced us to Tejo (the explosive national sport of Colombia).

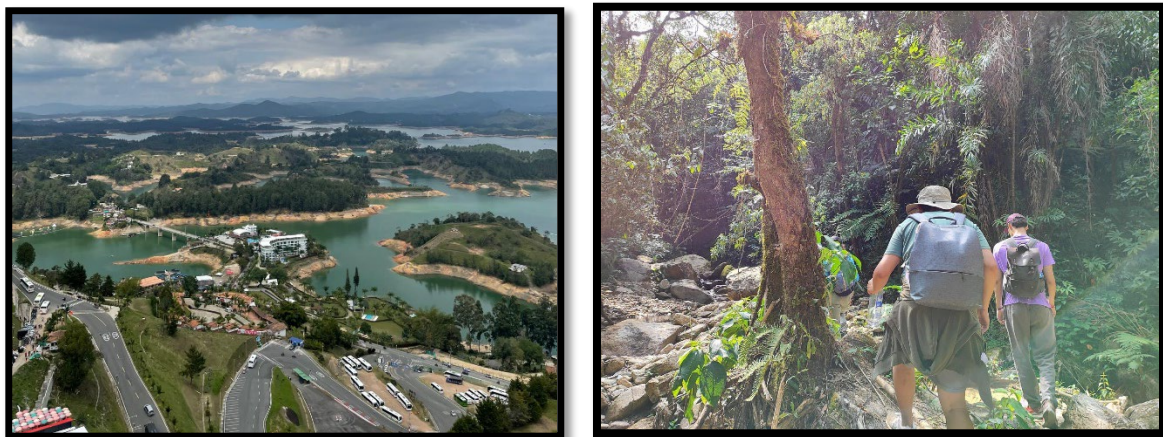


Figure 9 & 10. The view from on top of the rock of Guatapé: Hiking excursion with Samuel

Reflecting on the whole trip and experience, it was truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us both. It has provided me with another perspective on engineering and life. I have made friends on the other side of the Earth. I am truly grateful to have been offered such an opportunity from KTH, but more specifically, Stefan Hallström and Magnus Lindqvist. This trip would also not have been as insightful or enjoyable without my colleagues Christian, Samuel, Johan, Camilo, and Diana. The project became much more than just another school course; it became something more meaningful and engaging. It became my life for two months.