

SLEEPING BEAUTY

by DAVID EBERSHOFF

Published March 2007

Even during Colombia's darkest years, Cartagena was spared. David Ebershoff visits this dreamy city by the sea, a place that wears its rich history as lightly as it does its languorous charm

Willy Gutiérrez knows a lot of people in Cartagena. He walks around the city shaking hands. In the Plaza de Bolívar, the central square, he greets the shoeshine man, the man who makes limewater, and the woman advertising ten-cent calls on her mobile phone with a sign hung around her neck. In the Plaza de los Coches, site of the old slave market, he calls out to the newspaper boy, the coconut confectioner, and the *palenquera*, who sells watermelon and bananas from the enamel pan on her head. He knows the seven Jesuit priests who live in the former home of Saint Peter Claver, Cartagena's beloved saint, and the pair of teenage auxiliary police officers on duty outside the Gold Museum. The lady in a white cotton beret at the juice counter knows Willy so well that he doesn't need to place his order: watermelon shake, no straw. He knows many of the ticket takers hanging out of the commuter *busetas* and quite a few of the moto-taxi drivers who'll give you a lift around town for about seventy-five cents, helmet included. I can't walk a block with Willy before someone shouts "*¡Hola, Willy!*" Willy likes to think of himself as the mayor of the streets. If such a position existed in Cartagena, it would be hard to imagine anyone else getting the job.

I'm here to see how Colombia's long-running civil war has treated Cartagena, the languid, legendary colonial city on the Caribbean made familiar to many by *Romancing the Stone* or the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez, depending on one's point of reference. Cartagena's history is an amalgam of Spanish, native Indian, and African heritage. Catholicism has always been the dominant religion, but Jews, Muslims, and practitioners of the indigenous religions have had their influence as well. This diverse history presents itself in the faces of the roughly one million citizens, who are for the most part of mixed descent, and in its architecture, its percussion-heavy music, its very pace of life. It's a steamy, tropical city edged in by the sea and the mangrove swamps. The midday sun is cruel, the trade winds arrive only late in the afternoon, and the air is sleepy, lazy with the knowledge that the next day will be the same as today.

Since the early 1980s, Colombia has become synonymous, to American ears at least, with kidnappings, bombings, and cocaine. Guerrillas, paramilitary groups, narco-terrorists, gangs, thugs, cartels—even experts have had a hard time deciphering who is fighting whom and why. But there has been no mistaking the bloodiness. During the 1990s, according to the *New York Times*, approximately 35,000 people were killed in the ongoing civil war; that number goes much higher if you include those who died as a result of the criminal violence that overran many parts of the country. Another one to two million people were displaced.

But even in the bloodiest times, the violence never reached Cartagena's walls. Why not? It's a question I ask nearly everyone I talk to about the city. There are a lot of theories.

LAHEROICA.COM

Willy says it's because of the coral, brick, and quicklime walls that surround the historic center: Originally built by the Spanish, they've protected the city for hundreds of years. Former president Andreas Pastrana, who is the current Colombian ambassador to the United States, believes Colombians love the city too much to hurt it. "Cartagena is the symbol of Colombia," he says. "All Colombians take pride in it. During the years of violence, even the narco-traffickers respected it." A Wall Street analyst, who keeps a more jaundiced eye on Andean geopolitics for investors, jokes that even the terrorists needed a place to vacation. Others say it's the easygoing Caribbean lifestyle—political problems seem less urgent when you can go to the beach. Although that explanation sounds a bit flimsy, there's something to it. The difference between Bogotá and Cartagena is something like the difference between New York and Santa Barbara.

The truth is probably a combination of these explanations and something else—luck, a political deal, the weather, who knows? For whatever reason, Cartagena has remained safe: For nearly two decades, it has been a haven for Colombia's middle and upper classes. The middle class came on holiday. The upper class brought architects and decorators and bought up a number of the crumbling mansions. Among a certain set, renovating a house in Cartagena implied social status. They whitewashed the stucco, repointed the coral stones, wrought the iron grilles, shored up the wood balconies, repaved the patios, turned on the water in the fountains, planted the bougainvillea. Historians like to talk about the unintended consequences of war. While civil war was ripping up much of Colombia, Cartagena was being restored.

There are two sides to Cartagena—the life on the street and the life behind the gate—and no place represents this better than the Plaza de Bolívar. Some of the city's most important buildings surround the plaza—the cathedral, the Inquisition Museum, the Gold Museum, the Central Bank. The plaza is a crossroads and a resting point. People traverse its paths as they go about their errands. Others stop to cool themselves near the fountains or on the benches under the palms and the rubber trees. Vendors sell coconut milk, orange water, peanuts, lollipops, cigarettes. One man has refitted a baby stroller into a coffee cart. I'd be exaggerating if I told you Willy knows everyone in the plaza. But he knows a good many, including the public historian who, according to Willy, stands on a box and recounts episodes of Cartagena's history for a few hundred pesos.

Willy works for the tourism ministry, guiding visitors around the city. He starts every day at the Jesuit cloister named for Saint Peter Claver, the seventeenth-century Spanish monk who baptized 150,000 slaves in the New World. On his deathbed in 1654, in a final act of humility, Peter Claver declared himself the "slave of slaves." In 1888, Pope Leo XIII canonized him—the first monk in the Western Hemisphere to be so designated. Saint Peter Claver is a revered figure in Cartagena. The understated church named for him has a subdued facade of coral stone, a butter-colored cupola visible from almost anywhere in the city, and tall doors that open at precise times of day. A couple of years ago, Willy tells me, six green parrots began visiting the bell tower every day at sunrise and sunset—an exoticism that feels like a flourish from a García Márquez story.

Willy is thirty-six, a trim, compact man who keeps fit by walking around the walled city. A former navigational officer in the Colombian Navy, he has a degree in history, a mind for dates, and a way of highlighting the memorable historical tidbit. This is evident when he ushers me over to Saint Peter Claver's glass and gold-leaf coffin. The saint's skull rests on a pillow. His other bones are in a white sack covered by a gold cassock. His remains are intact except for two bones: His femur resides in his hometown of Verdú, Spain; and in 1986 Pope John Paul II brought a piece of a finger bone back to Rome with him as a relic.

LAHEROICA.COM

Cartagena has had a long relationship with the macabre. In 1610, the city became the seat of the Spanish Inquisition in Latin America. Although never as bloody as its counterpart in Iberia, the Dominican-led push to root out heretics, witches, Jews, and other undesirables resulted in roughly seven hundred local persecutions and five autos-da-fé. The Inquisition Palace is a grand Andalusian-style building freshly restored as a museum on the north side of the Plaza de Bolívar. There's a display of torture racks, stockades, and a scale used to weigh women accused of witchcraft to see if they were light enough to fly. On the outside wall, at the height of a person on horseback, is the denunciation window. Here, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Cartageños with a grudge would anonymously slip the names of heretics through the iron grille. Across from the window is another of Willy's friends, a vendor of *pasteles de bocadillo*—flaky triangles of pastry with a line of bocadillo jam on the end, the jam pale pink and tasting of guava. I ask Willy if he knows everyone on the street. "Oh, sure," he says. "The city is my friend."

Founded in 1533 on a small Caribbean peninsula, Cartagena quickly became one of the most important cities in Spain's South American empire. Much of the gold, silver, emeralds, and pearls stolen from the Incas and other Andean civilizations passed through its warehouses. By the middle of the sixteenth century, nobility and merchants there were building Andalusian- and Moroccan-style palaces and mansions, all with elaborate courtyards hidden from the street by high wooden gates. The colonial administration put up stately public buildings and laid out plazas and squares, and the Catholic Church erected a soaring cathedral, churches, and many monasteries and convents, rivaling the throne for influence and wealth.

So much treasure was amassed in Cartagena that soon French and English pirates were attacking the city, looting the loot. Sir Francis Drake sacked the city in 1586 with twenty-five vessels and more than two thousand men, returning it to Spain for the ransom of 120,000 ducados. The Spanish built an elaborate complex of walls and forts, a project that lasted nearly two hundred years and required the labor of some eighty thousand slaves. It culminated in the Castillo de San Felipe, Spain's largest military fort in the Americas, an imposing structure that looks something like the pyramids outside Mexico City. It was designed with trapdoors, *casamatas* ("niches of death," Willy explains), and two thousand feet of internal tunnels, some of which deliberately lead nowhere. It and many of the city's other fortifications remain intact, including almost all of the walls that surround the historic neighborhoods where Willy presides with a handshake and a smile. The walls now make a scenic promenade. Along the way are a number of garrets that you can step into to look out at the Caribbean through a musket hole.

In 1811, the Colombians first declared their independence. Eight years later, with the help of Simon Bolívar, the country was theirs. But afterward, Cartagena's prominence began to decline. The new port city of Barranquilla, less than a hundred miles to the northeast, overtook it economically. During this time, the upper class abandoned the city for the open spaces of nearby Manga Island. Some of their former mansions and palaces would remain empty for more than a century, moldering in the humidity. The old city became old for the first time.

The next century brought fits of renewal, but this wasn't always for the good. In the sixties and seventies, Cartagena tried to take Havana's place as the jet-set's Caribbean playground: Discos and casinos opened; city promoters started a film festival; the Miss Colombia pageant was held annually by the Hilton's pool. But for the most part,

LAHEROICA.COM

developers turned their backs on Cartagena's history, building a new neighborhood of concrete condos and hotels in Bocagrande, a spit of land southwest of the old city.

Meanwhile, the historic center languished. Many of the mansions, convents, and monasteries were carved into apartments, boardinghouses, offices, and storage spaces. There were exceptions, of course—the old Santa Clara convent was turned into a luxury hotel long before the current wave of renovation—but as a friend who grew up in Cartagena tells me, twenty years ago there were few shops, restaurants, or people in the old town. "Only your dad went down there," he says, "and then only to go to work."

The party in Bocagrande continued until the early 1980s, when guerrillas and drug lords from the Andean lowlands and the Pacific coast escalated their feuds with the federal government into all-out civil war. Soon, Colombia became one of the most dangerous countries in the world, according to U.S. State Department travel advisories. Except for the lonely Lonely Planeter, international tourism came to a halt. Conventional wisdom held that Cartagena was about to enter another period of neglect and languor, but that would prove to be wrong.

In 2002, the Colombians elected Álvaro Uribe president on his platform of returning law and order to the country—a promise he has mostly made good on, thanks to billions of dollars in U.S. military support. (President Bush considers Uribe his strongest ally in left-leaning South America.) In four years, Uribe's right-wing government has managed to mostly contain the political violence to isolated inland regions; with a few exceptions, it is no longer a part of daily life in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and other major cities. Travelers still need to take precautions, but foreign tourists are beginning to return, and for many, the first stop is Cartagena.

The best way to get to know Cartagena is to do what Willy and I did for several days—simply wander around. The historic city is divided into three neighborhoods: El Centro, where you'll find the major churches, museums, and plazas, and where the nobility once lived; San Diego, an upscale residential neighborhood formerly occupied by wealthy merchants and top military officers; and Getsemaní, traditionally home to Jews, Muslims, blacks, Indians, gold- and silversmiths, and low-ranking military officers. El Centro has seen the most renovation, Getsemaní the least, which makes it, in some ways, the most interesting for strolling. In the mornings, the streets smell of dust, sun, and motorcycle exhaust. In the afternoons, the salty trade winds blow through the palm fronds and ferns, and the air smells damp and leafy.

In all three neighborhoods, the streets are generally wide enough for a car and a half. Private houses are built right to the curb. A security cage of wooden spindles lets the breeze and gossip pass through the windows, and sometimes a cat. One afternoon, Willy and I walk down Calle de Don Sancho, an elegant street in El Centro that leads to the plaza in front of the theater. An old man in nothing but a pair of shorts is leaning against his window, his hand propping up his chin. Several hours later, when we pass his house again, he remains in the same spot, undisturbed.

The houses everywhere, whether modest or grand, keep the street out with a wooden gate that has a smaller door cut into it. Bronze buttons sometimes decorate the gates. "The more buttons, the more money," Willy explains.

It's at these gates that Cartagena's two sides meet. There's the life on the street—the men and women with pushcarts, the students flirting in the shade of a rubber tree, the businessmen in a hurry, the priests and nuns cool in short sleeves, the tourists (still

LAHEROICA.COM

mostly from Colombia and other parts of Latin America) taking it all in; Willy's Cartagena thriving on the curb. And then there's the life behind the gates. It's impossible not to wonder what's inside the mansions and palaces and private homes, where the courtyard fountains overtake the vendors' cries.

If Willy is the unofficial mayor of Cartagena's streets, then Teresita Román de Zurek presides over the life behind its gates. She is one of the city's grandes dames, the matriarch of its most prominent family, and Cartagena's honorary mayor—a title given her for her many civic contributions, including a best-selling cookbook on the local cuisine, and her leadership in returning horse-drawn carriages to the city center. (A friend of mine correctly points out that the horses' canter on the pavement sounds like *Cartagena-Cartagena-Cartagena.*)

Teresita lives behind the gates of Casa Román, possibly Cartagena's most famous private home. It's an extravagant nineteenth-century Moorish fantasy whose arched windows are copied directly from the Alhambra. The house is built around a tiled courtyard, and doors lead to sitting rooms and bedrooms. Teresita was born in this house some eighty years ago (it seems rude to ask the precise date). She is a handsome, stately woman with well-coiffed reddish-brown hair. Her earrings are two large hunks of lapis lazuli. Teresita comes from a family of famous chemists who emigrated from Spain in the early nineteenth century. The first Román in South America washed up near Cartagena's beach after his Lima-bound ship went down. Despite this inauspicious beginning, the Románs have held positions of prominence in the city for almost two hundred years. A nephew is the former mayor. Her father invented Kola Román, an electric-pink soda popular throughout the region. Her cookbook features a number of recipes that use Kola Román imaginatively, including plantains marinated in Kola Román and Kola Román fruit cocktail. As Teresita is telling me about her recipes, her maid offers me an ice-cream soda made with Kola Román. It tastes like bubble gum.

Above all, Teresita is known and loved for her collection of 1,470 dolls (reportedly the largest in Colombia) representing the nations of the world. She began the collection in 1948 with a Romería del Rocío baby doll in a frilly linen skirt. One of her most recent acquisitions is a Shakira doll, which stands in a prominent place in the Colombian group. Teresita keeps her collection in glass displays that fill a corner room in Casa Román. When I visited, three assistants were busy labeling, cataloging, and cleaning the dolls.

If Teresita Román de Zurek sounds like a character out of a Gabriel García Márquez novel, it's because she is. Several years ago, Gabo, as everyone around here calls him, published a book of short selections from his many novels and stories accompanied by photos of the people who had inspired characters in his work. There's a picture of Teresita in her drawing room with dozens of broken plates on the floor. Behind her is a collection of Napoleon-era ladies' fans—a gift from a suitor when she was a girl, Teresita tells me. She sent him packing but kept the fans. Teresita's nephew Antonio de Pombo Román tells me that García Márquez didn't invent magical realism. He just looked around and wrote everything down.

Until Shakira came along, García Márquez was the most famous Colombian in the world. Many people in Cartagena consider him the city's first son, although he was actually born in Aracataca, a few hours inland. He first came to the city in the late 1940s and has maintained an affiliation ever since. His house in San Diego, across from the sea, is a modernist red-stucco villa with a high wall and a discreet gate. From the roof deck of the Santa Clara, you can look into his courtyard and swimming pool—an irony because

his short novel *Of Love and Other Demons* looks inside the Santa Clara before it became a luxury hotel.

Another way to see behind Cartagena's gates, then, is to stay in (or at least visit) one of the many historic hotels. In the seventeenth century, the Santa Clara was a convent, and when I walk through its entrance, a gate of elaborate ironwork, I like to imagine the ancient Clarissan nun who once held its key in her palm. The lobby is red and furnished with ecclesiastical simplicity. It opens to arched galleries surrounding a courtyard. A pair of toucans live in the garden's dense ferns. The birds, right off a Fruit Loops box, visit me at breakfast one morning, nabbing my yucca roll.

The Santa Clara is not the only good hotel in town, though—not anymore. In 2004, Cartagena got its first world-class small hotel when Gustavo Pinto opened the Agua Bed and Breakfast. A designer from Bogotá, Pinto is part of Cartagena's restoration trend. He spent a year renovating an abandoned seventeenth-century tobacco baron's mansion not far from the cathedral into something both historic and modern. Like many houses here, it's Andalusian in style—whitewashed walls, red tile floors, mahogany and cedar accents—but its history never overwhelms its flawless design sense.

The public spaces are decorated with white couches, black-and-white photographs, and original accents that give the Agua a feeling of being both familiar and wholly its own. The best part of the hotel is the rooftop pool and sunbathing tower. From here you can look out to the cathedral, the fields of pantile roofs, and the Caribbean. It's a private view, one you can see only by leaving the busy street and passing through a gate. But if you knock, the gatekeeper will let you in. It's always interesting to enter Cartagena's houses, whether public or private. Although the facades are similar, every courtyard is different, every fountain trickles to its own notes, every roof offers a uniquely lovely view of the sea. One morning at sunrise, I take a ride in a Colombian Navy Cessna C206. We fly over the city at seven hundred feet. Beneath me, the streets Willy and I have walked frame the blocks of houses. From the sky you can see into each courtyard, and it's like peering into the house's heart. Street after street, block after block, house after house—from one end of the city to the other—there it is, Cartagena, all of it surrounded by thick coral walls.

After several days of walking around, I feel like going to the beach. This is the Caribbean, after all. But Cartagena's beaches aren't what you'd expect. The sand is thick and brown, muddying the water. The surf is rough and tricky. These are city beaches, like those in San Juan and Coney Island: crowded, noisy, and fun—not relaxing and desolate. For that, most people go to the Rosario Islands, a coral archipelago southwest of the city, an hour and fifteen minutes away by boat.

One morning, I depart Cartagena's marina for the Santa Clara's sister hotel on Isla Grande. Our launch cruises past an enormous Virgin Mary that stands on a platform in the middle of Cartagena Bay, welcoming home sailors and fishermen. We pass the naval base where Willy was once stationed. Farther out, I see the two coral-stone colonial forts that guard the entrance to Cartagena's waters.

There are twenty-seven islets in the Rosarios, some so tiny that there's room for only a house and a dock. The islands are mostly undeveloped or dotted with private beach houses and a few small hotels. The Hotel San Pedro de Majagua is on Isla Grande. Although it's the largest islet in the archipelago, it's so rustic that there are no roads or cars. Its eight hundred inhabitants make their living from fishing or, increasingly,

LAHEROICA.COM

tourism. Isla Grande is a coral formation, which makes it dry and rocky and not especially lush, but the waters are clear and green and blue.

The launch pulls up to a dock in a cove. The Majagua's seventeen coral bungalows are spread over a few acres of seafront property shaded by caucho and majagua trees. I check into a room called the Octopus. It's spacious and spare, with white concrete floors and a white bedspread and a view through the cauchos to the sea. It's the type of place to stay when you're in love or alone.

I spend the afternoon under a frond umbrella on one of the hotel's private beaches, alone but for a couple of local boys selling shell necklaces. They live in the island's interior, off the crisscrossing dirt footpaths that serve as its only road network. The boys offer to take me on a canoe tour of the island, or to arrange a hike with an eco-guide, a boat trip to another island, or snorkeling and scuba diving. But I don't do any of those things. After so many days of walking, I feel like sitting. The boys head off in the direction of the hotel's other beach. Now I'm alone, and the only sound is that of the sea chopping at the shore. I pick up *Of Love and Other Demons* and begin to read about Cartagena in another age. Before I realize it, I find myself on everyone's idea of a fantasy Caribbean vacation: a book, a deserted beach, blue water.

The next day, before breakfast, I go down to the dock. It's early and no one is around. The winds have died, and the sea is very calm. A fisherman pulls up in a canoe. He has with him a net made of a sheet of green mesh nailed to two wood poles and a sawed-off water bottle. Schools of sardines are swimming around the dock. The fisherman opens his net, drags it through the water, and pulls up about a dozen sardines. He lets the water strain away, then pours the fish into the water bottle, where they shimmer and flop. Each one is about two inches long, silver, and resembles a AAA battery. The fisherman repeats this four times, until he's gathered forty or fifty sardines. He folds up his net, takes the bottle back to his canoe, pushes off from the dock, and paddles out to sea.

I walk up to the pavilion for my café con leche and scrambled eggs. The launch back to Cartagena leaves at eleven, which means I should be back in the Plaza de Bolívar by twelve-thirty: plenty of time for a fruit shake before I begin, once again, to wander the dreamy streets.

Published in March 2007. Prices and other information were accurate at press time, but are subject to change. Please confirm details with individual establishments before planning your trip.

Concierge.com © 2007 CondéNet Inc. All rights reserved.