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Timeless quality of a faded jewel

By John Reed

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I have a thing for cities that passed their prime centuries ago, former trading centres steeped in faded glory such as Bruges, Dubrovnik or Zanzibar. Cartagena fits the bill beautifully. It grew to life in the Age of Exploration as the Caribbean's biggest slaving port and an outlet for the mines of Peru. But its wealth made it prey for buccaneers and over the centuries its fortunes declined with that of imperial Spain. Gabriel García Márquez immortalised the city in *Love in the Time of Cholera* as "the most beautiful in the world" with its "marble palaces and the golden altars and the viceroys rotting with plague inside their armour". The master storyteller has a house in the Old Town, which any taxi driver will point out for you if you ask.

If I were to design an ideal city, it would look a lot like Cartagena: compact, pedestrian-oriented and architecturally harmonious, with reliably warm weather. One of my favourite places is the Plazuela de San Diego, a square with the intimate proportions and good acoustics of a ballroom. It has wooden-balconied colonial houses and a church painted whimsically bright yellow and blue, facing a courtyard with mature trees and, on weekends, live music. From a café table on a sultry evening, you can dance along with the locals or watch rich Colombians from the country's mountainous interior showing off their cars, their bodies and their clothes.

Colombia is an astonishingly beautiful country slowly coming to grips with its long-running problems of political conflict and violence. Cartagena was, I'm told, long ago declared off-limits for bad behaviour by the drug barons, some of whom own houses there. Tourists have come and high-rise condos sprawl unattractively along the waterfront beyond the Old Town. But the city's historical centre, which rivals Havana's, remains intact and even its official name is grandiose: *Cartagena de Indias*. Although this is meant to distinguish it from the Spanish seaport of the same name, I like to imagine it as a piece of Baroque-era hyperbole: "The Carthage of the Indies".

I am lucky enough to have extended family in the city through my partner Germán. His sister Adis lives in Crespo, a middle-class neighbourhood near the airport. Upon arrival – usually from chilly Bogotá – we roll our suitcases out of the small terminal into the steaming hot street, and a different world. At Adis's apartment, we change into summer clothes and sit down to a pleasingly local meal of fish or meat, coconut rice and fresh tropical fruit juice.

Cartagena has a timeless quality, much as you might expect from a city that inspired García Márquez. It is an antique world where everyone has four names and itinerant street vendors sell avocados and corn *tamales* from bowls balanced on their heads. Time itself warps and wanes in odd ways in a city where people like to use the word *ahorita*, a diminutive of "now", meaning sometime in the future.

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On a recent visit, breaking with my usual languid Cartagena routine of meals, naps and café-crawling, I made an effort to play the tourist. My first stop was the Palace of the Inquisition, which also houses Cartagena's historical museum. It is worth visiting to remind yourself that this beautiful, hedonistic city was built by prissy, horrible people in black clothes and starched collars. Downstairs, there is an exhibition featuring torture devices and a terrifying, hilarious set of questions the Spaniards used when interrogating "witches" (sample question: "Who taught you to fly?"). Upstairs, the exhibition traces the city's history from pre-Colombian times. The descriptions are in Spanish but there are plenty of paintings, swords and devotional objects to see.

I also recommend circumnavigating the city walls before 10am or at sunset. We started out at 11 – due to the usual Cartagena delays – and were drenched in sweat within 10 minutes. If you like architecture, it is worth venturing out of the Old Town to visit Getsemaní, a picturesque but scruffy neighbourhood settled by former slaves, or La Manga, a quarter of *belle époque* mansions where *Love in the Time of Cholera's* Dr Juvenal Urbino lived.

Cartagena's urban beaches are grimy and unsuitable for swimming. However, there are blue-water beaches worthy of a rum advert a boat ride away on the Rosario Islands or at Portonaito.

Cartagena ranks alongside Salvador de Bahia in Brazil as one of Latin America's most vibrantly African cities. African influences are evident in the city's mostly mulatto and black population, in food and in music, notably *cumbia* – Colombia's national rhythm – and *champeta*, a hip-hop-style genre now in vogue. If you stick around the Plaza Santo Domingo long enough, Afro-Colombian folk groups will perform, accompanied by drums. Do like the locals do of an evening and order a whole bottle of rum, which Colombians drink like wine.

Another pleasant night-time pursuit is a ride on a *chiva*, or traditional painted, open-sided bus of the type Colombians cherish. This is shamelessly touristic but great fun and most of the other tourists are locals. A live band sitting in the back of the bus plays *vallenatos*, the rollicking, accordion-driven rhythm of the Caribbean coast, and you are encouraged to dance or play along on percussion instruments.

But you do not have to look far – or, for that matter, necessarily pay money – to find a dance party in Cartagena. On weekend evenings, there is music coming from nearly every street. One evening we passed an open-fronted fax and copy shop whose employees had segued from daytime duties into a thumping evening *rumba*. We continued to the Plazuela de San Diego, where a group of musicians began playing *bullerengue*, a slow, haunting, very Colombian mix of African drums and Indian-style flutes. We joined them and stayed late into the evening, clapping and dancing along

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