

Cartagena, Caribbean Jewel

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AFTER dining in the courtyard of a colonial mansion, couples at Bodegon de La Candelaria climb narrow stairs for rum drinks in a rooftop cupola. An aging Spanish Republican plays an accordion and sings of the old country, and a Caribbean breeze softly wafts through open windows and over a pensive audience sprawled on worn sofas. Beyond the windows, the roofs of Cartagena are illuminated in a yellowish glow -- church towers pockmarked by cannon balls from pirate ships of long ago, sloping tile roofs of the 18th-century houses of colonial grandees and massive defending walls that once broke the spirit of Britain's Royal Navy.

After 20-odd years of rambling around South America, I easily nominate this ancient Colombian seaport as my favorite port of call on the continent. Many Americans would place a Colombian vacation on their list of holidays in hell. The State Department describes most of Colombia as "volatile and dangerous," recommending that visitors stay off back roads and limit their trips to Cartagena and a handful of other tourist enclaves. But few Americans know that tourism is Colombia's third largest foreign exchange earner, after coffee and oil. The key is Cartagena -- Colombia's most popular tourist destination, a tranquil jewel on the nation's 1,000-mile Caribbean coast.

With charter flights arriving here from Canada and Europe, foreigners now account for almost 40 percent of Cartagena's tourists. In a sign that Americans are waking up to this Caribbean secret, 132 cruise ships docked here last year -- nearly a fivefold increase over 1991. With the Cartagena Hilton doing a booming business, an Inter-Continental hotel is scheduled to open next year.

While many Cartagena promoters put "Colombia" in tiny print, the city's attractions lend themselves to bold face -- balmy weather, excellent seafood, 450 years of history, interesting excursions, high quality shopping and personal safety that is no worse than in, say, San Juan. In a continent of street crime and monumental traffic jams, Cartagena, a city made for strolling, is a rarity.

As Colombians and foreigners buy vacation homes here, gentrification and historic preservation are making Cartagena's historic center the most expensive real estate market in Colombia. When I first visited here, as a high school student in 1973, Cartagena was a sensuous, decaying city -- tropical poverty overlaid on a glorious past. On my most recent

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visit, last February, I was jolted to discover that two chic boutiques -- a jewelry store (Cano) and a leather store (Marroquinaria) -- have outlets in Manhattan's Trump Tower.

But in a city of 800,000 with 50 hotels and dozens of boarding houses, there is a Cartagena for every budget -- and the Colombian peso is kept at a level that makes the city one of South America's cheaper destinations. With planning, the biggest expense can be the \$559 cost of a round-trip ticket on Avianca's daily, two-and-a-half-hour flight from Miami to Cartagena. The 50-minute air shuttle from Bogota costs as little as \$150 round trip.

With high temperatures ranging from 86 to 93 degrees, Cartagena's weather is a little drier and marginally cooler during high season, from mid-December to mid-April. Water pollution limits activity on the urban beaches to sun-bathing. For swimming, most visitors take excursion boats to the crystalline waters of Baru Island. Although every former Colombian president now seems to own an oceanfront apartment here, informality prevails during all seasons, with shorts acceptable day and night.

As Colombia's international showcase city, Cartagena routinely sees international festivals and congresses swallowing up hotel rooms. Last year, all of Latin America's heads of state converged here for an Ibero-American summit meeting. Next week, dozens of world leaders are to converge here for a meeting of the Nonaligned Movement. Regularly scheduled festivals in the city include the International Film Festival in early March, the Festival of Caribbean Music in late March, the Miss Colombia beauty pageant in November and the Moonlit Jazz Festival in December.

For a first-time visitor, the best orientation is to take a late afternoon taxi ride up to La Popa, where a white-washed monastery stands atop the city's highest hill. Built in 1607, the monastery is worth a quick visit before the 5:30 P.M. closing time (\$1.10 entrance). Sunsets from this summit are spectacular, and a visitor, with map in hand, can use this vantage point to sort out Cartagena's confusing puzzle of lagoons, walls, forts, peninsulas, shantytowns, marinas and canals.

A little history helps one to understand why Colombians often call Cartagena "Heroica." In 1533, almost a century before the English Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock, a Spaniard founded Cartagena of the Indies, so named to differentiate it from Spain's Mediterranean seaport. A decade later, a French pirate, Robert Baal, looted gold bullion from the city, setting off two centuries of attacks by French and English pirates.

"La pirata Drake," a tour guide hissed to me on my first visit, referring to a man I had learned about in New England schools as Sir Francis Drake. Pirate or gentleman, Drake looted and sacked Cartagena in 1586.

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In the Spanish colonial system, Cartagena was a central warehouse for most gold and silver extracted from the Andes. Here fleets of galleons would form for the trans-Atlantic crossing to Cadiz. Spain turned Cartagena into a South American Fort Knox, guarded by a network of seven forts and defensive walls that average 40 feet high and 56 feet thick. Today, the ancient walls, forts and sentry boxes give the city its three musketeer charm.

KING PHILIP II, also known as "the Prudent," started construction of what became Spain's largest fort in the Americas, San Felipe. A masterpiece of Spanish colonial military engineering, the fort is fascinating to visit. Guides lead visitors through subterranean tunnels, showing secret communication systems and galleries used by sentries. Stair designs gave defenders firing angles that allowed them to shoot at invaders without being seen. The fort's ramparts, defended to this day by 18th-century cannons, offer excellent views of the old walled city. Admission is \$4.

In 1741, a British admiral, Edward Vernon, massed 186 ships, 3,000 cannons and 24,000 soldiers for an assault on Cartagena that was designed to smash Spanish power in the Caribbean. One regiment was commanded by Lawrence Washington, a half-brother to George. The Washington family was so enamored of Admiral Vernon that they named their Virginia estate after him -- Mount Vernon.

For his part, Admiral Vernon was so confident of victory that he coined in advance commemorative medals showing the Spanish defender, Gen. Blas de Lezo, kneeling before the British conqueror. Depicted with all his limbs intact, in reality, during the course of a long military career, this tough Spanish general had lost his left leg, his right arm and his right eye.

After taking La Popa convent, the British attacked San Felipe fortress by land. By the end of the day, they had lost 1,000 soldiers. With dysentery, malaria and yellow fever also ravaging the ranks, Admiral Vernon cut his losses and retreated. Never one to cower behind the lines, the Spanish general was wounded in his remaining leg, an injury that soon proved fatal.

After this stalwart defense, Caribbean buccaneers largely left Cartagena alone. Today, in front of San Felipe, a bronze statue recalls the Spanish defender.

Strolling the historic district, a visitor quickly sees that defense defined Cartagena's urban plan. To shorten attackers' line of fire, streets are slightly crooked. In contrast to the baroque fantasies found elsewhere in Latin America, Cartagena's cathedral and its churches have thick walls and austere interior lines. Providing a sense of intimacy, these narrow cobblestone lanes are laid out to catch ocean breezes and to maximize shade for pedestrians. Many plazas, such as Customs Square, have cool sidewalk arcades.

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After exploring restored sections of Cartagena's old town it is easy to see why, a decade ago, Unesco declared the city World Historic Patrimony. Spanish colonial houses, casonas, with rust red, mustard yellow, deep green and sky blue exteriors have wooden balconies, high ceilings and interior courtyards. Several of these casonas are now restaurants: Bodegon de La Candelaria, La Escollera la Marina, Classic de Andrei, El Figon de la Factoria and Restaurante Marcel in Casa Skandia.

Government agencies also have restored houses, which are often open to the public. Colombia's Foreign Ministry has an office in a classical estate that once belonged to the Marquis of Valdehoyos. The Gold Museum (Museo del Oro) occupies another. Through a new historic preservation school, the Spanish Government promotes restoration techniques. Last year, King Juan Carlos inaugurated the Caribbean Naval Museum, a magnificent colonial era building renovated largely with Spanish aid.

One sinister building I always avoid is the ornate Palace of the Inquisition, an intimidating colonial building with a massive oak door studded with iron bolts. For two centuries, Cartagena was the regional throne for these high priests of intolerance. Today, in this relaxed beach city, the Inquisition's repressive legacy seems very far in the past. One of Cartagena's most popular festivals is the January contest for Miss Tanga -- Miss String Bikini.

Exploring Cartagena's walled city often is confusing because street names change from block to block. The simplest approach is to wander these well-policed streets after office hours when car traffic dies away. Another way is to rent a horse and carriage for a relaxed evening roll over the cobblestones.

A city that lends itself to evening strolls lends itself to pub crawling, although it is hard to beat the rooftop piano and accordion bar at Bodegon de la Candelaria. One favorite is Taberna La Quemada, on Calle de la Amargura, where Marlon Brando filmed scenes for "Torquemada" in 1968.

Another favorite haunt is Paco's, named after one of its founders, Paco de Onis, son of Juan de Onis, a New York Times correspondent in these parts in the 1960's and 1970's. Paco has moved on, but his British partner, Nicholas Beeson, keeps up the tradition of deep fried seafood, brimming pitchers of sangria and, on weekend nights, the Cuban sound of Los Veteranos del Ritmo.

For nondrinkers, this corner of the tropics offers a wide variety of freshly squeezed juices -- papaya, mango, guava -- and some not readily recognizable in English -- corozo, lulo, nispero and guanabana.

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One way to club hop is to climb aboard the "rumba en chiva," a brightly painted city bus that features a live band and dark rum, served liberally in plastic cups. Tickets must be bought in advance for this rolling party, which circulates in Bocagrande, a peninsula dotted with modern hotels.

As the night wears on, it is best to steer clear of Colombia's most notorious export -- cocaine, which is easily available for those who look for it. Every season, a few Canadian tourists are arrested at the international airport with a few kilos stuffed in their suitcases. Colombian potencies can pack deadly surprises. Last year, during the Ibero-American summit, a nephew of Brazil's then-President, Itamar Franco, died of a cocaine overdose at the Navy Hospital.

In the daylight, Cartagena offers surprisingly sophisticated shopping for a city its size. Because of the increasingly affluent tourist influx, the city has Colombia's largest concentration of antique shops. One, Anticuario del Mar Comarca, specializes in items retrieved from sunken ships, such as brass portholes and compass cases.

Colombian leather goods increasingly approach Italian quality, at lower prices. Several stores offer portfolios, belts and handbags. Colombian emeralds are world-reknowned, but should only be bought through reputable jewelers. Colombian prices should be at least one quarter off stateside prices. The Galeria Cano chain has three shops in Cartagena. The Cano family collection of pre-Columbian gold formed the base for the Gold Museum's collection. For handicrafts, Artesanias de Colombia is behind the Convention Center, in Claustro de San Francisco, a late 16th-century structure built as a Franciscan monastery.

Half a block from the city walls, at 39-77 Calle Las Bovedas, is a mustard and blue trim townhouse of special interest to Americans. A ground-floor apartment belongs to Rosario Ames. Last year, Mrs. Ames was convicted of conspiring to commit espionage -- helping her husband, Aldrich Ames, to sell C.I.A. secrets to the Soviet Union. The Ameses bought an apartment here, now worth about \$300,000. Four years from now, Mrs. Ames is expected to be released from prison in the United States. Confounding Cartagena tradition, the pirate could well retire, to live inside the city walls. Seafood, stew and swimming pools

The State Department says crime and guerrilla activity are hazards along Colombia's north coast and in other areas, but cites Cartagena as an exception.

Dining

Cartagena specializes in seafood in romantic settings. Popular local cuisine includes rice with coconut, fish stew and, for dessert, tamarind balls. Chilean and Argentine wines are imported in abundance.

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The country code for Colombia is 57.

Club de Pesca, Fort San Sebastian del Pastelillo Manga, telephone 666-1239, offers dining outside in the shadows of the ramparts and sentry boxes of a 16th-century fort. While watching sailboats and gulls, patrons dig into a shellfish stew specialty -- paella con mariscos. \$60 for two.

Bodegon de la Candelaria, Calle de las Damas, 664-7251. In this mansion inside the walled city musicians serenade diners in the internal patio. Seafood specialties include avocados filled with baby shrimps; after dinner, the climb to the rooftop cupola leads through a museum. \$90 for two.

Classic de Andrei, corner of Calle de las Damas and Ricaurte, 660-0968. With ceiling fans and potted palms, this Mediterranean-style restaurant has a light and airy feel. Lobsters picked from the water tank end up 45 minutes later on dinner plates, grilled or with mustard; excellent service. \$75 for two.

El Figon de la Factoria, 36-98 Calle de la Factoria, 664-1044. Situated in the new Spanish Cultural Center, a colonial town house with white-washed walls and a fountain in a quiet Moorish courtyard; the bar serves a chilled and generous glass of sherry (Tio Pepe). Tapas, the Spanish hors d'oeuvres, are \$13; a bowl of cold gazpacho costs \$8. Lodging

Unless otherwise specified, rates are given for double occupancy, calculated at 900 pesos to \$1.

El Caribe, 665-0155, fax 665-3707. Opened in 1945, this Miami Beach-style landmark of pink pastel and white trim pioneered hotel development on Bocagrande, then a deserted peninsula of sand dunes. In a poolside garden, parrots squawk in cages under the shade of mangli trees with white painted trunks. The Caribe still boasts Cartagena's largest swimming pool, an important asset in a city with polluted beaches. Rates: \$170.

Hotel Las Americas, 664-4000, fax 664-9000. A tastefully decorated beachfront resort that opened last year, one of the first major hotels to open north of the city. Three pools, 2 tennis courts. Rates: \$213 for one, \$27 for each additional person.

Cartagena Hilton, 665-0666, fax 665-2211. A high-rise anchor at the end of Bocagrande, the Hilton offers family entertainment as well as one of the city's best seafood restaurants, El Tinajero. Rates: \$209.

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Hotel Casagrande, 665-3943, fax 665-6806. A clean two-story mansion overlooking Bocagrande ocean beach; \$73 for a room with air-conditioning; \$50 for a room with a fan; prices 20 percent higher during peak season.

Hotel Santa Clara, 312-0375; reservations in Bogota 571-236-3039, fax 571-312-0365. The first luxury hotel inside the walled city, this hotel is to open Oct. 14 after a \$10 million renovation of a 17th-century hospital and convent. Rates: \$228. Excursions

Although Cartagena is investing in a sewage treatment system, its beaches are still polluted, so there is ample reason to make excursions. One possibility is taking boat trips to the clean beaches and waters of Baru Island and of the 27-island archipelago of Rosario National Park. Local travel agencies can book day trips to Rosario, which cost from \$12 to \$35 round trip and usually include exploring coral reefs, snorkeling in transparent waters, lunch and a visit to dolphins and sharks in the aquarium (\$1) on San Martin Island. Boats, including the venerable Alcatraz, leave from Pegasus dock, between the Convention Center and old town's Clock Tower. For now, Baru Island, about 15 miles from Cartagena, is reachable by motor launch or by car, over a dirt road and on a ferry. Last year, work started on a Baru Beach and Marine Resort, a \$260 million development that will include a yacht marina, a heliport, 900 hotel rooms, and 500 condominiums, villas and mansions

Turning inland from Cartagena, some visitors drive 15 miles on a paved highway for a half-day visit to the Turbaco Botanical Gardens, the leading collection in a country blessed with one of the world's highest levels of biodiversity. Admission is about \$1.10. For lunch, stop at the nearby plantation house, Hacienda Matute, which specializes in grilling fine meats by a swimming pool, a dietary change after Cartagena's seafood extravaganzas. Full meals run \$5 to \$10.

Another nearby inland destination is San Basilio de Palenque, the highland redoubt of descendants of runaway slaves. On Cartagena beaches, Palenque women plait hair and sell fresh fruit from broad baskets they balance on their heads. At home, about an hour's drive from Cartagena, the palenqueros maintain today their independent and combative spirit. Palenqueros speak a Caribbean Spanish sprinkled with West African words. Over the last 20 years, this village of about 10,000 has produced a disproportionate number of Colombia's lightweight boxing champions.