

The New York Times

GOING TO
Cartagena



Eliana Aponte/Reuters

Watching the sunset in Cartagena.

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WHY GO NOW The people of Cartagena want the world to know that their city is not like the rest of Colombia. Perched atop South America on the southern rim of the Caribbean Sea, Cartagena feels a million miles from anything having to do with guerrillas, paramilitaries, narcotics or kidnappings.

This former hub of the Spanish empire — a major shipping port for New World riches, and a slave market and Inquisition center — is surrounded by massive stone walls, within which sit hundreds of gorgeous colonial homes, churches, plazas and parks. The Old Town, a Unesco World Heritage site, is filled with friendly people and harmless, if persistent, souvenir hawkers — all conducting their lives, business and romances outdoors.

In fact, Cartagena, crime-wise, compares well with other [Caribbean](#) destinations. Though the State Department continues to warn of the dangers of travel to Colombia, it says that "violence in recent years has decreased markedly in most urban areas," including Cartagena. A department spokeswoman said its officials in Colombia were "not aware of any kidnappings of Americans in or around Cartagena in recent years."

The rare American visitor will find a vibrant contemporary city with an intriguing history, within easy reach of Caribbean islands. There's even a fairly well-developed tourist infrastructure, though it's

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geared mainly toward Spanish speakers. But if you bring a Spanish phrase book along with an appetite for Latin and Afro-Caribbean food and culture, you won't be disappointed.

WHERE TO STAY Most Colombian tourists stay in Bocagrande, a beach resort just south of Old Town that's lined with aging high-rise hotels and condos. But truth be told, the crowded beach there is less than alluring. Old Town, where everything is within walking distance, is more appealing.

At the high end is the Sofitel Santa Clara (Calle del Torno, 57-5-664-6070; online at www.sofitel.com), which is ensconced in a magnificent 17th-century convent. The Santa Clara offers 19 colorful, antiques-filled suites in the colonial wing and tropical wood-and-white rooms in the Republican wing. Balconies overlook either the sea, Old Town or a courtyard inhabited by toucans. Rates for the 96 Republican-wing rooms, excluding taxes, range from 515,000 to 1,100,000 Colombian pesos (about \$232 to \$495, at 2,300 pesos to the U.S. dollar).

Another convent-turned-hotel is the 91-room [Charleston](http://www.hoteles-charleston.com) Cartagena (Plaza Santa Teresa, 57-5-664-9494; on the Web at www.hoteles-charleston.com). It features two courtyards dotted with early colonial religious art, and a rooftop pool and restaurant that offer panoramic views of the city and coastline. Doubles start at 598,000 pesos.

Agua (Calle de Ayoa 4-29, 57-5-664-9479; www.aquabedandbreakfast.com), calls itself a bed-and-breakfast, but it feels like an exclusive boutique hotel with its photography-lined walls, well-stocked library and rooftop pool. The six rooms, furnished in tropical style, start at 497,000 pesos.

One of the newest hotels is the lovely Casa La Fe (Calle Segunda de Badillo 36-125, 57-5-664-0306; www.casalafe.com). Opened last year by an Englishman, Geoff Chew, and his Cartagenian wife, Carmen Marrugo, it is an affordable and comfortable hotel built around a small courtyard and a rooftop dipping pool. The 11 double rooms start at 150,000 to 220,000 pesos, depending on the season, and include hot breakfast and Wi-Fi access. Casa La Fe, as well as Agua, offer a private boat for island hopping.

WHERE TO EAT Seafood is the name of the game here, whether it is steamed, grilled, smothered in coconut sauce or poached in a Colombian stew known as sancocho. The city's culinary star is the nuevo-Caribbean El Santísimo (Calle del Santísimo No. 8-19, 57-5-664-3316), where innovative cuisine is served in a glorious courtyard decorated with contemporary folk art. The chef and owner, Federico Vega, applies Cordon Bleu techniques to Caribbean ingredients like coconut, plantains and coriander. Try the mustardy salmon ceviche (11,000 pesos), the delicate coconut-broth fish soup (10,000 pesos), or the sautéed shrimp in a mango or tamarind sauce (30,000 pesos). Save room for the mango mousse in an all-butter pastry shell (8,000 pesos).

Restaurante Donde Olano (Calle Santo Domingo 33-08, 5-75-664-7099) adds French-Creole flair to fish in a cozy bistro with eclectic art and romantic guitar serenades. Try the Camarones Olano,

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sautéed shrimp served with four sauces, including caramelized passion fruit (32,000 pesos). No credit cards accepted.

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A lively courtyard and salsa band make for a great evening at El Mar de Juan (Parque de [San Diego](#), 57-5-664-2782). Specialties include the Pescado a la Marinara, grilled sea bass served with a lightly curried sauce dotted with shrimp and calamari (39,000 pesos). Next door, Pazza Luna, a pizzeria under the same ownership, makes a very good thin-crust pizza (15,000 to 20,000 pesos).

You can have dinner with Che and Fidel, or at least vintage photos of them, at La Bodeguita del Medio (Calle Santo Domingo No. 33-81, 57-5-660-1993). The mojitos (12,000 pesos) are as tasty as the fried yucca (8,000 pesos) and the Solomillo Santero, a grilled steak with a Roquefort sauce (22,000 pesos).

For lunch, rub elbows with the locals at Lonchería Bolívar (Calle de Nuestra Señora del Andrinal No. 32-20), where a satisfying meal of grilled pork or a chicken cutlet will only set you back 8,000 pesos. It's also a good place to try the city's amazing assortment of exotic fresh fruit smoothies. The citrusy lulo is a revelation, especially at under a dollar a pop.

And one shouldn't leave Colombia without sampling arepas, the cornmeal pockets stuffed with chicken, cheese and, sometimes, egg. Two places to try them are the stands at Parque Fernández de [Madrid](#) and at Parque de San Diego.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY Each day here begins with a choice: history or sun.

To learn about the city's past, go to the Palacio de la Inquisición (Plaza de Bolívar, 57-5-664-7381; admission 8,000 pesos). Founded in 1533 by the Conquistador Pedro de Heredia, Cartagena was the third and final site of the New World Inquisition. Hundreds of witches and other heretics were tortured and executed there. Typical of Cartagena museums, the exhibits are labeled in Spanish only, although the stocks and racks tell their own chilling tale. General admission is 8,000 pesos. English-speaking guides can be hired for 15,000 pesos.

Almost every church in Cartagena is worth visiting, especially the newly restored Santo Domingo (Plaza Santo Domingo), a 16th-century blue-and-peach cathedral that is also used for music concerts and contemporary art shows. Humbler, but no less storied is the Church of San Pedro Claver, named for a priest who ministered to the slaves and was the first person in the New World to be canonized.

To go sightseeing beyond Old Town, take an afternoon group tour aboard a "chiva," a brightly painted, open-air bus. The tour, which any travel agent or hotel can arrange (for about 60,000 pesos

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round trip), stops in Bocagrande on its way to the Convento de la Popa, a hilltop convent located at the city's highest point, and the Castillo, arguably the grandest fort in the former Spanish colonies.

For a day at the beach, head for the Rosario Islands, a group of 27 small coral islands about two hours away by boat. Day-trip boats leave daily from the Muelle Turístico (60,000 pesos round trip, with lunch) and the fare includes entry to the Oceanario, an open-sea aquarium with sharks, stingrays and an entertaining dolphin show.

To avoid the crowds, arrange a trip through your hotel for a smaller, private boat (the Casa La Fe's boat, for example, seats 10 and can be hired for a full day for 420,000 pesos). Don't worry about packing lunch. Vendors on these islets serve some of the best grilled octopus and crab you've ever tasted — cooked over open fires.

WHAT TO DO AT NIGHT At dusk, cool Caribbean winds and lively music lead visitors to the Plaza Santo Domingo. With regular performances there by Afro-Caribbean dancers, the outdoor cafes are a perfect spot for people watching. Inviting bars include the Comarca (Calle Santo Domingo No. 3-38), with its nautical motif and spirited troubadour, and the Sofitel Santa Clara's tropical-chic lounge. For late nights, the intimate salsa club Quiebra Canto (57-5-664-1372, no cover), which overlooks the Parque del Centenario, has a place reserved just for you on its small, welcoming dance floor.

WHERE TO SHOP Old dungeons, buried inside the city's northern walls, house some of Cartagena's best handicraft stores. The Bóvedas shops sell straw hats, gold and emerald jewelry and other tourist souvenirs at reasonable prices. Don't miss Museo Taurino, a bullfighting museum-cum-bar run by a gregarious storyteller.

For high-end Colombian crafts, visit Galería Cano (Plaza de Bolívar, 57-5-664-7078), which showcases some of the country's best Indian artisans. Exquisite handwoven hats (255,000 pesos), colorful hammocks (406,000 and up) and replicas of pre-Columbian jewelry (95,000 pesos and up) stand out.

Clothing and accessories by local designers can be found on the streets off Plaza Santo Domingo and Plaza Santa Teresa. One highlight is María Camila Mesa (Calle Baloco No. 33-01, 57-5-664-7227), which sells fabulous beaded necklace-earring sets for 35,000 to 75,000 pesos.

YES, FREE The city walls, built to defend against marauding pirates, also offer breathtaking views of the Caribbean and the city's picturesque skyline. Look for the statue of Catalina, a Carib Indian who served as an early interpreter for the conquistadors; the wooden remains of a bullfighting ring; and Gabriel García Márquez's imposing modernist-colonial house by the sea.

YOUR FIRST TIME OR YOUR 10TH For a quintessential Cartagena experience, spend an evening at the cozy Parque de San Diego, in the heart of Old Town, across from the Sofitel. On a Saturday

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night in January, cafe tables spilled out of restaurants, strolling guitarists played songs by the Colombian stars Shakira and Juanes, artists peddled glittery jewelry and a woman fried egg arepas in a street stand. The crowd was a lively mix of families, hipsters, wealthy tourists and young couples on dates.

HOW TO STAY WIRED There's no shortage of Internet cafes, though Wi-Fi is less common. One of the best cafes is Micronet (Calle de la Estrella No. 4-47, 57-5-664-0328) which has 11 fast computers that cost only 1,000 pesos a half-hour. Like most everything else in the city, it's closed on Sunday.

HOW TO GET THERE Avianca Airlines (800-284-2622, www.avianca.com), Colombia's national carrier, flies nonstop between [Miami](#) and Cartagena on Wednesday and Sunday, from about \$440, but most flights go through Bogotá. Recently, round-trip Web fares between New York and Cartagena in late April started about \$525.

GETTING AROUND Taxis are plentiful and safe and should cost no more than 4,000 pesos for trips within Old Town or to Bocagrande. Horse-drawn carriages often come with an informative driver and range from 35,000 to 45,000 pesos.