

Colombian Gold in Cartagena



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The Caribbean and its beaches are popular with locals and sun-seeking travelers.

By TIM PARSA

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You're probably still a bit gun-shy about visiting [Colombia](#), put off by the country's long history of cocaine-fueled mayhem. Travel qualms diminish or subside entirely, however, when you're the guest of a trusted local who assures you that Pablo Escobar is dead and buried. Which may explain why a class of well-connected travelers has recently been alighting in the [Caribbean](#) port city of Cartagena and raving about the place upon their return.

Call them "sophistonauts" — those wide-roaming urban nomads, often third-culture kids, expats or grown-up diplo-brats who tend to live outside their countries (plural!) of citizenship and bounce around a social web connecting them to equally geographically flexible, curious confreres. The sophistonauts have not been visiting Colombia because they are braver than you and me. Nor have they been going for Cartagena's balmy climate or the city's peculiar colonial [architecture](#) or its rowdy history of pirates and plunder. The sophistonauts are flocking to Cartagena because they've been invited, in this case by proud Colombian friends eager to show off their favorite national beauty spot in full flower after decades of abandonment.

Jade Duhamel, a waifish half-French, half-Mexican 22-year-old who currently resides in [Buenos Aires](#), came to Cartagena for a long weekend this past spring. It was her first visit,

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and one morning at 3 a.m., she was dancing energetically at Quiebra Canto, a dimly lit salsa club in Cartagena's old city. "I heard of Cartagena from friends in [Paris](#), but I imagined it different, like a Spanish-speaking [Jamaica](#) or something," she said. "You know, big spleefs and cold coconuts. I never thought it would be so. . . ." She searched for the right adjective and then offered two: "civilized but wild."

She came as the guest of a pal, a young Colombian woman who was expertly hip shaking nearby. The two were waving cuba libres at the juking-and-jiving crowd getting down to a song extolling the restorative virtues of eating salchicha con huevos (sausage with eggs) at dawn after a long night of fun. "We call this rumbeando," the Colombian friend said. "Partying, dancing all night, getting drunk, waking up early to go to the beach, then doing it again."

"Imposing but intimate" are two adjectives that also work to describe Cartagena's old city. It is circumscribed by massive fortifications — high, salt-bleached stone walls built in the 17th and 18th centuries to thwart pirates during the long stretch when Cartagena was the New World's collection point for loot en route to [Spain](#). If buccaneers took R & R on the island Tortuga, they earned their keep marauding ships coming and going from Cartagena. As a result, the old city has retained an air of cloistered coziness. You can walk from one end of it to the other in half an hour, although it's still easy to get turned around in the labyrinth of narrow cobblestone streets and find yourself stepping out into a plaza different from the one you intended to reach.

"Cartagena's old city is like . . . well, let's see — can I use more than two adjectives?" asked Gian Luca Brignone, an Italian new media producer who lives in Manhattan and was visiting Cartagena to attend the wedding of a Colombian friend. "It's like [Istanbul](#), but in the Caribbean. All those massive walls, but instead of the calls to prayer, it's salsa [music](#) everywhere and at all hours of the day. You peel a banana or open your glove compartment, and music comes out."

A few decades ago, Cartagena wasn't attracting many high-end voyagers. Wealthy locals had fled to modern neighborhoods outside the walls of the old city, transforming the colonial center into a dilapidated ghost town of abandoned mansions and flophouse youth hostels. The only foreigners visiting back then were the young and fearless truffle pigs of world travel — British geezers on their gap year, Israeli backpackers just finished with their military service, American college students channeling Kerouac — who are always sussing out the interesting places before they are quite safe enough for the rest of us. Even the truffle pigs were scared away in the '80s, a period when Colombia was earning its well-deserved reputation for frenzied violence as drug capos attempted to transform the country into one giant, streamlined cocaine factory.

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While car bombs and kidnappings terrorized Bogota, Cartagena was virtually untouched, mostly because after decades of decline it was the center of exactly nothing and so the target of exactly no one. Wealthy Colombians from the interior of the country recognized the unique beauty of historic Cartagena and started buying crumbling piles (at bargain-bin prices) and restoring them for vacation homes.

“We make fun of Cartageneros for throwing away this jewel,” said Patricia Mejfa Fernandez, a Colombian-born interior designer who has restored a dozen houses here over the past 15 years. “But it’s understandable. We have an expression — *la confianza da asco*, familiarity breeds contempt. Outsiders were needed to see the value of Cartagena. Locals only saw a rotting antique.”

Not all outsiders are so sanguine about Cartagena or Colombia in general. The State Department issued its most recent travel warning about Colombia in January 2006. The warning list is a Judas kiss for countries seeking to attract American tourists, and it’s easy to see why — Colombia shares company in this rogue’s gallery with Cote d’Ivoire (raging civil war with mobs targeting foreigners) and [Indonesia](#) (jihadi suicide bombers). Narco-terrorism and kidnapping are the principal perils that the State Department thinks you should know about, although the travel warning nods toward improvement, stating that “violence in recent years has decreased markedly in most urban areas, including Bogota, Medellin, Barranquilla and Cartagena.” Locals complain that the travel warning does not fairly represent Colombia’s improving stability, but the general negative impression held by foreigners isn’t ameliorated by recent stories about leftist guerrillas attempting to assassinate the mayor of Neiva, a small city in the interior, and government officials being linked to paramilitary groups.

“When has the Bush government been right about anything?” scoffed Amaury Muñoz, the press attaché for the city’s mayor, expressing a frequently encountered Colombian disdain for [United States](#) foreign policy. “It’s been 10 years since violence in the cities, and it never really touched Cartagena. Let them all kill each other in the jungles and the mountains, who cares! First you gringos give us these narco-problems because you love our cocaine. Then because of the problems you gave us, your government tells all of you not to visit Colombia. It’s the worst gringo hypocrisy!”

Hypocrisy or not, Colombia’s negative reputation can pose a formidable obstacle for locals attempting to lure American friends to visit. When Dan Gertsacov, an American film executive who lives in New York, and his wife, Andrea, who hails from a large Bogota family, were planning their wedding last year, many of their guests expressed strong concerns about traveling to Colombia. “About a third of the Americans accepted immediately. Another third sent their regrets a bit later — they asked around and decided it was too dangerous,” Gertsacov explained. “Another third were on the fence.” So the couple set up a wedding

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Web site with links to recent newspaper articles that talked about the improved security. Gertsacov said: “That did it. The fence-sitters just needed something to balance out all the old Pablo Escobar headlines.”

The Gertsacovs might have also sent clippings from ¡Hola! magazine, where the Cartagena wedding party has become a fixture — bullfighters and press barons, politicians and race-car drivers, ex-beauty queens and rising pop stars, all squinting and sweating in the year-round sauna-licious heat. There is also a battle royal of elegant house parties during New Year’s, with owners competing to see who can give the splashiest event for guests from around the world.

Arturo Zavala Haag, a Swiss-Mexican photographer and architect who divides his time between Paris and [Mexico City](#), thinks that the fast-spreading word about Cartagena’s charms will soon make moot any official admonitions. “My two adjectives are ‘architecturally uniform,’ ” he said. “That’s what makes Cartagena such a strangely beautiful place.” When informed that technically he was an adjective short, Zavala Haag took a moment and then complied. “O.K., then, ‘chic.’ ‘Architecturally uniform’ and ‘chic.’ The place is pretty goddamn chic.”

Zavala Haag is correct that conservation of most of the original colonial buildings is one of the city’s allures. The same fortifications that once protected the grandees also forced the neighborhoods of modern Cartagena to grow at a remove from the old city, sparing most of the original structures within the walls from being ripped down in the name of progress. (Good thing, too, as the barrios of Bocagrande and Lagunita, about 15 minutes away by car, are deeply unlovely, with rows of towering apartment buildings.) It’s as if Manhattan below Wall Street had kept its Dutch settlement architecture.

The houses that line the old city’s cobblestone streets give the place a magical ambience. The residences have a distinct Spanish colonial architecture, with tall shutters, thick wood-beamed balconies and stone towers in the back that originally served to spy ships on the horizon. Buildings of similar style can be found throughout Spain’s erstwhile colonial possessions — crumbling to pieces in Old [Havana](#), better preserved in Old San Juan, [Puerto Rico](#), and [Veracruz, Mexico](#). But only Cartagena has hundreds of these elegant edifices in widely varying states of repair, from roofless shells to lovingly restored wonders.

If the old city’s fortifications recall the days of pirates scheming to steal treasure that the Spanish had themselves purloined from all over the Continent, then the dark-skinned faces seen on the streets do as much to remind you that centuries of slave trading also served to fatten the city’s coffers. Cartagena was one of only a few ports on the Spanish Main where the sale and purchase of human beings was permitted. Kidnapped Africans arrived here by

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the pestilent and overcrowded boatload to travel onward to labor in the silver mines of [Peru](#) and the sugar-cane plantations of [Panama](#). (And who do you think built all these impressive fortifications?)

A large cobblestone courtyard near the clock-tower entrance to the old city (now Plaza de Los Coches) was the city's main slave market, although there is no sign commemorating it as such. The courtyard is now surrounded by raucous bars, and you can sit outside in the evening drinking rum over ice while teenage troupes perform interpretations of traditional African dances to the accompaniment of thundering drums. The rum, the drums, the sea breeze, the dark, flailing limbs of the dancers — it all raises an interesting question of a type pleasure travelers seldom confront: should you really be boozing it up in a defunct slave market?

Sadly, there is little information available in Cartagena about the history of the city's African population. Only a small section of an exhibit on the history of the city in the Museum of the Inquisition (another of historic Cartagena's happy institutions) is dedicated to the slave trade.

At the very least, visitors should probably take the time to note how one of the principal legacies of slavery in the modern world — the negative correlation between skin pigment and wealth — has color-coded Cartagena's old city. Regentrification has resulted in an influx of white faces and a pushing-out of darker-skinned renters. El Centro, which has the most impressive old edifices as well as many of the city's prominent churches, was the first area to be refurbished. The wealthy Colombians who renovated the old mansions here tend to be fair-skinned, as do the well-heeled guests of the new boutique hotels.

In contrast, there is Getsemani, whose low, small houses for centuries served as the city's slave quarters. Few affluent Colombians ever venture into this part of town except to visit its dance clubs. There are not many renovated houses or fancy hotels here, but Getsemani has the liveliest streetscape — most evenings it's like one big block party.

As urban renewal continues and the houses in Getsemani are buffed up into vacation homes and charming inns, the streets of the old city will still very much belong to the descendants of the freed slaves. They are the participants in the chaotic carnival that is quotidian in the developing world, the creative begging, the variably talented performing and the microcommerce of the poor and unemployed: women selling mangos and lulu fruits from baskets balanced on their heads; men hawking individual cigarettes; boys carrying thermoses, offering shots of strong coffee; sidewalk musicians and mimes with their hands out; vendors shilling everything from underpants to auto parts. In this way, the streets are a ubiquitous repository of an [Africa](#)-influenced culture and beauty that is one of Cartagena's greatest assets.

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“Without slavery, we would never have had the mixing of cultures, and without the mixing of cultures, we would not have the vallenato, the greatest music in the world,” explained Enrique Santos Calderon, editor in chief of Bogota’s leading daily newspaper, El Tiempo, as we drank whiskey in La Vitrola, a Cuban-themed restaurant in El Centro. Vallenato music, or some derivation of it, is what you hear throughout Cartagena, pouring out of houses and cars, in the restaurants and the dance clubs, where the rich Colombians and their guests frolic. It is the traditional music of Colombia’s Caribbean coast, and although historically the popular music of the poor, it has a passionate following among all Colombians. The music requires three instruments, one from each of the country’s principal cultures. There is the guacharaca (a notched piece of wood stroked with a wire brush) that the indigenous people invented long before they were subdued (read: massacred) by the Spanish conquistadors who arrived here in 1533. The Europeans contributed the accordion, and with the slave trades came the caja, a small drum.

Late at night, the old city emits a melancholy vibe of European grandeur transported to this new continent but ultimately abandoned to molder in the tropical heat. After Cartagena’s founding, the city’s elite, descendants of the original soldiers and merchants, were eager for it to attain culture to match its wealth. Theaters were built and operas performed. Universities were founded, and the latest books and fashions were imported from across the ocean — everything came first to Cartagena before being transported to the rest of [South America](#).

But then came independence from Spain in 1811 and the emancipation of the slaves in 1851, followed by a deadly outbreak of cholera. Suddenly, the city lost its economic raison d’etre. The center of culture shifted to Bogota, while Barranquilla, a city farther north on the coast, became Colombia’s principal port. Cartagena turned into relic, a mausoleum within its high walls.

“We looked hard at shooting somewhere else because there was some trepidation from the talent,” said Dylan Russell, one of the producers of the film “Love in the Time of Cholera” (scheduled for release this November). As we clack-clacked through the cobblestone streets on our way to a cast party in an old-fashioned carriage pulled by a skinny nag, he said, “But just look at this place.

Where else are you going to find all this?” The film stars Javier Bardem as a pathologically romantic gentleman who waits 50 years to reunite with the love of his life in a crumbling tropical port city that could be only Cartagena. It’s based on the novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who was raised a few miles down the coast, studied and worked as a journalist in Cartagena, and owns a vacation house near the grandiose Santa Clara hotel, which any local can point out. Russell described the three-month shoot as coming off without a hitch — some of the actors even looked at real estate. As we passed the shrine of San Pedro Claver,

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a saint who dedicated his life to caring for the slaves (there's a new sushi lounge right in front of it), he shouted, "You must tell your readers that Cartagena is an enchanted castle city full of rusty cannonballs!"

How safe is Cartagena for the average voyager who isn't a movie star with a security detail or the sophisticat guest of wealthy Colombians with retinues of armed guards? Cartagena feels as safe as the new gringo mecca of Buenos Aires, at least to this large 30-something white male. It passes the "staggering home drunk through predawn streets while bellowing Shakira" test, a fail-proof diagnostic of any locale's risk level.

In fact, the most menacing figures you are likely to come upon during a visit are the leering vice-trippers, those globe-trotting sybarites who come here for beautiful young girls who have few options for making money and for the drugs — cocaine, while illegal, is cheap, pure and easy to procure. In response, the government has placed undercover police on the streets to catch tourists buying drugs, and a campaign against child prostitution is plastered throughout the city.

Most foreign visitors have more benign intentions, however, and some have moved here permanently. Several of the boutique hotels that have opened in the last few years are owned by sophisticats who were invited to Cartagena by Colombian friends, fell in love with the place and decided to stay. "It was love at first sight," said Diana Chen, a software engineer from [San Francisco](#) who nows runs the lovely five-room Casa Boutique Veranera. "I wanted to own something here, to be part of the amazing history of the place."

Charlie Chaplin's daughter, the writer and filmmaker Jane Chaplin, has lived in Cartagena since the mid-'90s. She came for romantic reasons but stayed because "it's a place where you can work in peace and quiet, but you can also invite friends to visit. When you share Cartagena with a visitor, you feel like you are letting them in on a great secret."

Colombians may gripe about travel warnings dampening tourism, but 10 years from now the visionaries who rescued the city from its decline might fondly recall the days when most foreigners were too scared to visit. "Cartagena survived pirates," Chaplin said with a shrug. "It can probably survive tourists."

VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Avianca (800-284-2622; www.avianca.com), Colombia's national airline, flies nonstop between [Miami](#) and Cartagena every day except Thursdays; other flights from the United States go through Bogota. Visas are not required for American visitors.

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HOTELS

The hotels in the old city offer more charm and convenience to sights. Agua Hotel: Exquisitely designed boutique hotel, with six guest rooms. Calle de Ayos 4-29; 011-57-5-664-9479; www.hotelagua.com.co; doubles from about \$270. Casa Boutique Veranera: A jewel box of a hotel with a [spa](#) and yoga studio. Calle Quero; www.casaveranera.com; doubles from \$200. Casa El Carretero: Intimate property located in the funky Getsemani neighborhood. (415) 508-3927; www.casaelcarretero.com; doubles from \$250. Hotel Sofitel Santa Clara: Located within a magnificent 17th-century convent. Calle del Torno; 011-57-5-664-6070; www.hotelsantaclara.com; doubles from \$426.

RESTAURANTS

Cartagena's hothouse climate means there is delicious produce year-round to accompany the local seafood. 8-18: Trendy international fare with Caribbean accents. Calle Gastelbondo; 011-57-5-664-2632; entrees \$15 to \$18. Juan del Mar Restaurante: Funky seafood joint run by the charismatic actor-bullfighter-singer Juan del Mar. Plaza San Diego; 011-57-5-664-5862; entrees \$13 to \$21. La Vitrola: Glamorous Old Havana-themed restaurant. Reserve ahead; it's a favorite with locals. Calle Baloco 2-01; 011-57-5-664-8243; entrees \$15 to \$30. Restaurante Club de Pesca: An outdoor restaurant located in the San Sebastian fort serving top-notch seafood. Fuerte de San Sebastian del Pastelillo; 011-57-5-660-5863; entrees \$42 to \$60.

BARS AND CLUBS

Café del Mar: Set on top of the old fortification walls overlooking the sea. The crowd isn't as interesting as its location, but it's open late and the vibe is tropical chill-out. Baluarte Santo Domingo; 011-57-5-664-6513. Comarca: A former nautical antique shop that evolved into a bar. Calle Santo Domingo 3-38; no phone number. Quiebra Canto: The best club for an authentic Cartagena scene. Carrera 8B, No. 25-110, Edificio Puerta del Sol; 011-57-5-664-1372. Tu Candela: Latin pop and salsa in a tight-packed room; a thousand romances (or at least passions) have been sparked by people squeezing past each other. Portal de los Dulces; 011-57-5-664-8787.

BEACHES

Cartagena doesn't have the Caribbean's best beaches, but the water is crystal clear. The Rosario Islands, a group of 27 islets, are about an hour away by boat. Even better is Baro Island, on a peninsula that juts out from the city, a 45-minute boat trip away. Here there's a public beach, Playa Blanca, open to day trippers.