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Property investors buy up Columbia as the country's economy booms

Cocaine and kidnap? Think again. Colombia has changed, says our correspondent, and investors are cleaning up too



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Few countries inspire such a strong reaction as Colombia, so mention buying a house there and people start to roll their eyes. For decades, the name has been synonymous with kidnapping, cartels and cocaine, so why entrust your savings to a property there? One good reason is its little-known sophistication. Then there's evocative Spanish history, friendly people (not gun-toting guerrillas) and, perhaps more than anything, a booming economy.

All come together in Cartagena de Indias, a stunning old colonial port on the Caribbean: one of those magical places that gets people hooked. Since it was founded in 1533, the port has seen everything from gold and silver to slaves pass through, but it is the seductive lifestyle that wins today, with excellent restaurants, funky bars, designer shops, a tropical climate and blissful beaches. Somehow, that security question fades away.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the city's most famous native son, painted its charms in his book *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a screen version of which, by Mike Newell, is released on Friday. Shot in the picture-postcard *centro*, it shows the grandiose mansions in which the wealthier classes lived a century ago. Scott Steindorff, the film's American producer, took the plunge and bought a place, and Garcia Marquez keeps a holiday home there.

Even Donald Trump is said to be buying coastal land between Cartagena and Barranquilla, the big industrial city to the northeast, inspired, perhaps, by talk of plans to build an international airport halfway between the two.

In fact, canny investors who ignored sensational headlines and bought property in the past four years have done exceedingly well, as prices have more than tripled. The catalyst is the "Uribe effect", a reference to Alvaro Uribe, the Harvard-educated president whose clampdown on crime has transformed the economy since he was elected in 2002. As security returns, investment booms. Cartagena is the seaside star, attracting the professional and creative elite from the capital, Bogota, a 90-minute flight away, as well as expatriate Colombians who want something back home.

Among Britons who have bought is Geoff Chew, 62, from Co Durham, who arrived in Cartagena by yacht four years ago and ended up staying. He now has four properties: a 14-room hotel in the centre, which he bought in ruins for £100,000 and completely renovated, a beach villa and two seafront flats, which he recently bought off plan for £100,000 the pair. He has also gained a Colombian wife and a second family.

“The beachfront area is far less expensive than the equivalent in Panama or Costa Rica,” Chew says. “But city-centre prices are overheated. There are few bargains left – you get much better value in the environs. The apartments I bought overlook the bay in Manga, but are only eight minutes’ walk from the centre.”

Inside the city walls, a decent-sized two-bedroom flat conversion costs upwards of £175,000 and a renovated house £1,500-£2,000 a square metre. Some are vast, with colonnaded patios, palm trees, galleried verandas and ornate balconies. Facades have been painted in brilliant hues, with swimming pools slapped onto rooftops to catch the breeze and the views. Many are available as holiday lets; architect-designed interiors make spectacular contemporary retreats, while others preserve the colonial style. Rental potential is an added draw, as a spacious three-bedroom house with a pool and staff can go for £500 a night. Thanks to the climate, buyers can count on letting out their properties for at least 90 days a year.

If the *centro* has peaked, where to buy instead? Curling round the bay on a spit of land are the adjoining high-rise neighbourhoods of Bocagrande and the more upmarket Castillogrande. In Bocagrande, a brand-new flat with three large bedrooms, a terrace, sea views, a garage and maybe a marble floor sells for £175,000.

For anyone hooked on the real thing, there remains the gently peeling character of Getsemani, just outside the walls. Gentrification is in full swing, yet prices are still affordable. Last year, Douglas Barnes, from Teddington, in southwest London, paid £125,000 for a three-bedroom house on a 200-square-metre plot, which he is renovating. “It’s habitable, but I’ll probably end up spending at least £100,000 on restructuring, including a rooftop pool,” he says.

Properties here are typically single-storey, smaller in scale and without the grandeur of the *centro*, but often with ornate detailing, tiled floors and a patio at the back.

So, are there no security worries at all? “I love the atmosphere at night, when locals sit around chatting on the plazas,” Barnes says. “I feel safe in the centre, and have never felt threatened – though there are areas I wouldn’t go to.”

Source:

http://property.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/property/overseas/article3545406.ece