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At home in Cartagena with Gabriel Garcia Marquez

The real star of *Love in the Time of Cholera* is the city in which it's set. Our correspondent explores colonial Cartagena

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Visiting film locations can be disappointing. Once the set designers and prop masters have left town, and the CGI wizards have worked their magic, there is often little correlation between the place on screen and the real thing.

Cartagena is a glorious exception. A former Spanish port on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, it is both the setting and the stage for *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a classic novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and now a movie by the British director Mike Newell.

The story tells how lovestruck young clerk Florentino Ariza, played by Oscar-winner Javier Bardem, waits 50 years for the hand of his childhood sweetheart, Fermina Daza.

Set around the turn of the 20th century, Garcia Marquez's tale of magical realism is infused with the sultry, torpid atmosphere of Cartagena, where he worked as a young reporter. Because of fears surrounding Colombia's recent violent past, the studio had planned to use Brazil for the location work – until Newell visited Cartagena and fell in love with it.

BACKGROUND

So exquisitely preserved is the fortified old town, with its 18th-century colonial mansions and perfumed courtyards, that little work was required to age it by more than 100 years. Although the resulting movie has received mixed reviews, Cartagena itself easily takes the full five stars.

In the old town, horse-drawn buggies rattle along narrow cobbled streets, and bougainvillea spills from carved wooden balconies. In the Parque de Bolivar, shoeshine boys shelter from the punishing midday sun beneath the shade of tall palms and rubber trees. Across the street, under the arches of the Plaza de la Proclamacion – where the market scenes were filmed – women in billowing skirts balance bowls of watermelon on their heads.

Wrapped around the old town are five miles of high battlements, built by 8,000 African slaves to protect their colonial masters from pirates. For more than 200 years, Cartagena grew rich on plundered treasure. Gold and emeralds stolen from indigenous South Americans were stashed in warehouses, loaded onto fleets of galleons and sailed back to Spain. Some ships fell to pirates – among them Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake.

One vessel, the San Jose, was said to have been sunk by the Spanish just outside Cartagena lest its hoard fall into British hands. The wreck has never been recovered. Today, the best introduction to Cartagena is to walk the ramparts, gazing across terracotta rooftops at ornate church towers and voluptuous cupolas. In the late afternoon,

as a welcome breeze blows off the Caribbean, students from the nearby university stroll arm in arm, and lovers curl up in the embrasures. In the people of Cartagena it's easy to see the influences of Africa, Europe and South America, mixed and melded over the centuries.

Charming and friendly, they move with a languid grace and exude an effortless sensuality, the men handsome, the women flirtatious. Nor do you need to look hard to find characters who could have been lifted from the pages of a Garcia Marquez novel.

My guide, Andres, who worked last year on the production of the movie, introduced himself with a soft handshake: "I am 59 years old and I have lived every day of my life in this city." In the atmospheric church of San Pedro Claver, where Fermina's wedding to Dr Juvenal Urbino was filmed, he pointed out an elderly man with silver hair and small, round spectacles who knelt and prayed silently in the back pew.

"Every time I come, he is there, always in the same place. Don't ask me why," Andres whispered. Pedro Claver, a Spanish priest, devoted his life to improving the lot of the city's slaves and is revered in Cartagena. He was canonised in the 19th century, and his bones lie in a glass-sided coffin beneath the church's altar, his skull resting on a pillow. Next door, beneath the crumbling porticoes of a former convent, is the cell where he lived and died. Across town, another convent has been cleverly transformed into Cartagena's finest hotel.

Retaining much of the original structure, including a splendidly overgrown courtyard, the Sofitel Santa Clara has incorporated a sumptuous pool and spa. If a room here breaks your budget, drop by for a cocktail and sneak to the fifth-floor terrace to gaze into the garden of the neighbouring house, owned by Garcia Marquez.

Until recently, if you had wanted to stay in the old town, you had a choice between the Santa Clara and a grubby fleapit. Over the past five years, however, more than a dozen houses have opened as small, stylish hotels. My favourites include Casa Quero, with thick stone walls, vast wooden doors and a rooftop pool, and Casa La Fe, run by Englishman Geoff Chew, who stumbled on Cartagena while sailing around the world, took one look and decided to stay.

It's possible that within a few years Cartagena will lose some of its magic. Spiralling property prices may force local people out of the old town and strip it of its authenticity.

Right now, though, the city is perfect: romantic, unspoilt, safe and cheap. Cartagena is ready for its close-up.

Source:

http://travel.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/travel/article3638357.ece