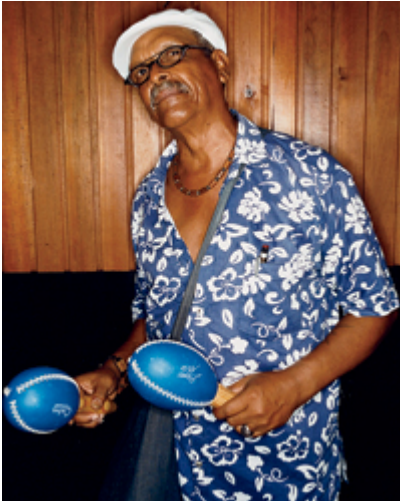


TRAVEL
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Cartagena, a Hidden Retreat

Take a dash of faded colonial grandeur, then add a dose of sultry nightlife and an influx of cosmopolitan travelers seeking the next great Caribbean hot spot. Oliver Schwaner-Albright sets his sights on an emerging Colombian getaway that delivers all this and more.

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The first time I went to Cartagena, back in 2003, I was taken straight from the airport to [Restaurante la Vitrola](#), a convivial spot with potted palms and a dapper six-man Cuban band stationed by the door. It's the [Caribbean](#) city's unofficial clubhouse, a place where dignitaries and journalists trade off-the-record jokes and women in expensive sandals pick at complicated salads.

This was a few years ago, and it was one of those times when the host has already taken care of the ordering: there was *carpaccio de mero*—grouper sliced paper-thin and dressed with lime and olive oil; and then there were grilled langostinos. At some point, after the band had struck up a rumba and waiters had brought us coconut flan and a bottle of aged rum with a wine bucket stuffed with chilled bottles of Coca-Cola, I thought about my friends in [New York](#), the ones who thought traveling in Colombia meant bouncing around in armored SUV's, and that this was a country best summed up by Pablo Escobar and *Romancing the Stone*.

Not that they knew anything about Cartagena de Indias, a walled city of 18th-century mansions and suffocatingly hot afternoons. It's one of the most important ports in the history of the New World, and one of the prettiest cities anywhere: Imagine Havana with a fraction of the population, or [San Juan](#) unmolested by modernity, or [New Orleans](#) without the sophomores on spring break. It's both crumbling and majestic, and only a 2 1/2-hour flight from [Miami](#).

Visiting Cartagena is like being let in on a secret, and this year, when I returned, I realized I was joining a cabal of travelers who could spend a week anywhere in the world—like the Pritzker Prize-winning architect who took a house for Christmas, the Vogue contributing editor who recently dropped in for a wedding, or the [New York](#) socialite who regularly appears on the Best Dressed pages of fashion magazines. They come here, as one put it, for the “old-school, conservative, Palm Beach crowd” and for a dash of jet-set flash. Bill Clinton is a fan. He stopped by in March to celebrate the 40th anniversary of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with Gabriel García Márquez, the city's most famous part-time resident.

Every season the crowd grows a little bigger and a little more glamorous, and from December to March finding a table at of-the-moment restaurants like 8-18, Palma, or La Vitrola can be tricky. But the busiest time is [New Year's](#) Eve, when rooms are booked months in advance and a famous Colombian pop star holds a concert on the city walls next to the Hotel Charleston Cartagena, a 300-year-old convent turned luxe hotel also known as the Santa Teresa. On that night, everyone drags their tables into the streets, transforming the entire city into a sinuous all-night dinner party.

The walls aren't just a photogenic artifact—they're the reason Cartagena de Indias is still standing. Founded in 1533, the town was sacked repeatedly during its first 100 years, including a 1585 raid by Sir Francis Drake, known in these parts as El Pirata Drake. But then the *cartageneros* built the walls and finished the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, one of the largest fortresses in the Spanish empire (which I explored one tranquil, sultry afternoon, amazed that it was constructed with coral mined from the reefs). By the early 1700's Cartagena was impregnable: in 1741 it held off 186 British warships, the biggest fleet assembled prior to World War II, and in 1811 the city earned the nickname La Heróica, when Simón Bolívar made it the headquarters for his campaign to liberate Colombia and Venezuela from [Spain](#). It was also excessively wealthy, thanks to a combustive economy of gold, sugar, and slavery. The architecture is the lasting relic of that prosperity, and if you stay in one of the chic smaller hotels, such as the stylish but private [Hotel Agua](#) or the exquisite [Casa Pestagua](#), you'll sleep under a frescoed ceiling and eat your breakfast in a lush, columned courtyard.

If there's a turning point in the story of modern Cartagena, it's 1995, when Sofitel opened the Santa Clara, a 121-room luxury hotel in the shell of a 17th-century convent. To my mind, the hotel is uneven: the older part is grand enough to host a head of state, but most rooms are undistinguished (if comfortable), as if they'd been plucked from a Florida resort. Building the Sofitel in the old city was a bold move for a town whose colonial center had been largely abandoned for crisp apartment towers in the nearby Bocagrande neighborhood, a curling finger of land with a skyline comparable to that of Panama City. Residents are still moving to Bocagrande, but over the past 15 years a cadre of taste-making Colombians has returned to the city inside the walls.

Like García Márquez, affectionately called Gabo. He set *Love in the Time of Cholera* in a fictionalized Cartagena (the movie version, starring Javier Bardem, was filmed on location here), and his house, Casa del Escritor, is the work of Rogelio Salmons, Colombia's greatest architect. It's all cubes and arches, Louis Kahn with palm trees and a view to the sea. There's a guard posted by the house, but like a character from one of Gabo's books, he's too skinny for his pants, and while tourists snap pictures in front of the rust-colored walls he rocks on his feet and daydreams.

Casa del Escritor is in San Diego, the quietest of the old city's four quarters. It's also where I found the best arepas in town: on the advice of a friend in Bogotá, I went to the Plaza de San Diego after dark, where a family-run stand with a cult following sets up on the corner closest to the Escuela de Bellas Artes, yet another converted convent. Most visitors tour the neighborhood in one of the horse-drawn carriages that clomp past the bright-colored walls and overgrown balconies. But I prefer to explore the narrow streets on foot at dusk, after the day's heat has faded. This offers a surprisingly intimate view of domestic life: the clatter of families eating dinner, children on a threadbare antique settee watching TV with the volume on too high. Then there are the houses that have been tastefully renovated and give glimpses of exposed beams and wall-size art through ornate window grates.

This is the private Cartagena of houseguests and weeklong parties, and my entrée to that world came courtesy of Chiqui de Echavarría, a legendary hostess whose home is a jasmine-scented pile by way of *World of Interiors*: instead of doing the expected thing and revamping a colonial mansion, she joined seven houses into a leafy labyrinth of landscaped terraces and half-ruined walls. It took three tours for me to get my bearings. There's a dance floor on the roof, and the former cistern is a swimming pool. We spent the evening outside in the almost-too-humid night air, sitting under a brick vault 30 feet tall, enjoying a meal of lobsters bought off the boat that morning.

Echavarria shuttles between her houses in Geneva, Cartagena, and Bogotá, and our small party—a pair of best friends who live in [New York](#) and their appealing daughters, both in their second year at Princeton, and a landscape designer from Bogotá—traded stories about how well-traveled Colombians abroad are automatically suspect. “I don’t use Tumi luggage because it’s too strong,” Echavarria said, explaining that customs agents regularly pierce her bags to see if anything sifts out, and ballistic nylon would just make them try harder. “All my clothes have holes,” she said to peals of laughter.

At dessert, Andrés Pastrana Arango—the former president of Colombia—crashed the party to show Ted Waitt, the billionaire philanthropist and founder of Gateway Computers, what everybody agreed is the most stunning house in Cartagena. A member of their group casually mentioned that she had just reserved a place on a private rocket that’s going to the moon, but then Pastrana Arango promised them a far more memorable sight, and holding a glass of *lulo* juice, made from a fruit that tastes like a cross between a passion fruit and a tart orange, he disappeared down a path to lead them on a tour of the gardens.

The busy Centro district revolves around the Plaza de Bolívar, an overgrown public square where teenage couples kiss and *palenqueras*—women who sell fruit from enameled tubs balanced on their heads—amble past old men playing chess on rickety card tables. Cartagena was a stronghold of the Inquisition, and one side of the square is dominated by the imposing Baroque façade of the Palacio de la Inquisición. It’s now a museum, with historical dioramas and crude 18th-century portraits of governors and generals upstairs; the first floor displays torture devices that illustrate how a little wrought iron might shape one’s faith.

In recent years, the streets around the Plaza de Bolívar have seen a handful of exquisite 400-year-old houses turned into intimate hotels. They call themselves bed-and-breakfasts, but there’s nothing frumpy about the 20-foot-high ceilings and tastefully minimal furnishings. At the newest, [Casa Pestagua](#), the stately upstairs rooms are furnished with 19th-century antiques that smell like beeswax. Then there’s the quiet and understated La Merced Hotel Boutique, across from the Teatro Heredia Adolfo Mejía, one of the city’s architectural gems, which has recently been restored to its original off-white. But a clear favorite is Agua, whose rooms are filled with dark antiques and soft white bedding. Here, you spend most of your time outdoors, either in sitting rooms that open onto the courtyard, or on the rooftop terrace, where the pool has a view of the cathedral tower. Each of the six bedrooms is decorated with art and Colombian furnishings from the collection of the owners; one has a painting by Botero. Like the others, Agua hides behind a heavy wooden door marked with a sign discreet enough to miss amid the crush of university students and fruit carts.

Of all the city’s grand hotels, my preference is the Santa Teresa, the more diminutive rival of the Santa Clara. Every afternoon, the plaza in front of the persimmon-colored building is colonized by chairs, and a makeshift bar serves drinks with the languid pace of an Italian café—a friend took me to a table and proudly said, “This is where I had a conversation with Carlos Fuentes that lasted all day.” Dinner starts late in Cartagena, and after a morning spent exploring and napping I fell into the habit of taking a dip in the Santa Teresa’s rooftop pool, then nursing a glass of *limonada* de coco (lime juice and coconut milk whipped up in a blender) while watching the sun set over the unmatched vista of the colonial skyline of church domes and bell towers.

The city’s stylish restaurants have a few things in common: good tropical-weather cocktails (white sangrias, caipirinhas), sophisticated Caribbean cuisine (fish grilled to a perfect rare, crowned by crispy plantains), and full reservation lists. There’s lively 8-18, where the best tables are upstairs and the *mero* comes with *crema agria*, something like a spicy crème fraîche. Or there’s loftlike Palma, a nominally Italian restaurant (there’s foccacia in the breadbasket), with refined South American dishes like a ceviche of corvina—a white-fleshed fish similar to sea bass—prepared with lime, hot peppers, and corn. Then there’s La Vitrola, the site of my first meal in Cartagena. When I returned this time, I was forced to dodge an overeager doorman, but once inside I didn’t want to leave. It’s the ideal example of a certain kind of restaurant: slowly spinning ceiling fans, a tiled floor, waiters in crisp white uniforms, diners in creamy off-white linen. By my third meal I began to act like a regular, waving away the menu and ordering the grilled fish of the day.

But if you want something more affordable, there's Restaurante Casa de Socorro, a cheerful place in the working-class quarter of Getsemaní. It's so popular that a half-dozen other restaurants put "Socorro" in their names, so I made sure to tell the taxi driver that I wanted to go to Casa de Socorro on Calle Larga. The portions are heroic: a starter like the *picada de tortuga*—stewed turtle meat—is a meal in itself, and a party of four could fill up on the *cazuela de marisco*, an intensely flavorful seafood stew that's something like a spicy seafood gumbo studded with fish, shrimp, sea snails, and octopus.

Casa de Socorro is on the friendly edge of the Getsemaní district, an area that's barely been touched by Cartagena's renaissance, where the streets are empty and forbidding at night. So, of course, it's where you find the best bars and clubs. At Quiebra Canto, dancing couples spill out onto the balcony and salsa music lasts late into the night. A half-bottle of a Colombian rum like Tres Esquinas costs around \$15 (though you might splurge on a superior Cuban label), and you'll get looked at funny if you order anything less.

Farther along the unwelcoming Calle de la Media Luna is Café Havana, a bright and friendly place where the walls are covered with black-and-white photos of the greats of Cuban music, like Celia Cruz and Ibrahim Ferrer, and the bar is the size of a bowling lane bent into a U. On the weekends, when it fills to a critical mass, Café Havana turns from a tavern into a dance hall, and when I was there the crowd was momentarily hushed by the appearance of a woman so stunning even the music seemed to lose its place. But then the room regained its rhythm. It was just the latest beautiful moment in the history of this heartbreaking city.

Also within this article:

[Guide to Cartagena:](#)

When to Go:

The city is at its best from December through April, when daily temperatures range from the mid 70's to the high 80's and the humid days give way to breezy nights. Christmas, New Year's, and Easter are especially busy, and hotels book up months in advance.

Getting There:

Avianca offers a direct 2 1/2-hour flight to Cartagena from Miami. Continental has connections through Panama City, while other carriers connect through Bogotá.

Where to stay:

[Casa Pestagua](#)

This intimate and luxurious hotel opened in 2007; some upstairs rooms have antiques original to the building. *doubles from \$356.*

[El Marqués Hotel Boutique](#)

The most reasonably priced of the small hotels. *doubles from \$205.*

[Hotel Agua](#)

GREAT VALUE

A favorite of the fashion set. *doubles from \$388.*

[Hotel Charleston Cartagena](#)

Known as the Santa Teresa, this former convent has more character than its larger competitor across town. *doubles from \$350.*

[La Heroica.com](#)

An agency offering Cartagena's best rental options, including stately mansions and one-bedroom apartments. *houses from \$700, apartments from \$400.*

[La Merced Hotel Boutique](#)

On a quiet corner by the city walls. *doubles from \$323.*

[Sofitel Cartagena Santa Clara](#)

Cartagena's first luxury hotel is in a peaceful part of town with a view of the sea, but most of the rooms are boxy and bland. *doubles from \$350.*

Where to Eat:

[8-18](#)

The sophisticated Caribbean fare draws a chic crowd. *dinner for two \$75.*

[Palma](#)

As urbane as 8-18 but more subdued. *dinner for two \$60.*

[Restaurante Casa de Socorro](#)

Traditional Caribbean *cazuelas*—spicy seafood stews—are served without fuss at a restaurant that deserves its reputation for having the most authentic food in town. *dinner for two \$25.*

[Restaurante La Vitrola](#)

Cartagena's see-and-be-seen power spot; the atmospheric setting makes up for less-than-dazzling food. *dinner for two \$81.*

Where to Go Out:

The bars by the Portal de los Dulces are always rowdy, and most nights out include a drink at one of the sidewalk tables set up at the Baluarte Santo Domingo fortress by Café del Mar, but skip the tourist traps on the Plaza de Santo Domingo.

Café Havana

There's dancing almost every night at this bar deep inside an iffy part of Getsemani—take a taxi there and back. *Corner of Media Luna and Guerrero; 57-315/690-2566; cafehavanacartagena.com; drinks for two \$9.*

Quiebra Canto

A lively bar with music on Fridays, a short taxi ride from the central city. *Parque Centenario; 57-5/664-1372; drinks for two \$7.*

What to Do:

Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas

This 300-year-old man-made mountain of coral and brick is one of the most formidable Spanish forts in the Americas. Bring a penlight to navigate the dimly lit passageways. *17 Pie del Cerro; 57-5/666-4790.*

Catedral de Cartagena

The tropical-fruit-colored façade hides a marble interior that offers a cooling respite from the hot city streets. *Plaza de Bolívar; no phone.*

Iglesia de San Pedro

Claver Moldering but imposing, the church contains the relics of the 17th-century Jesuit who baptized thousands of slaves. *Plaza San Pedro Claver; 57-5/664-7256.*

Palacio de la Inquisición

Plaza de Bolívar; 57-5/664-7381.

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