

## Cartagena: Colombia's magical city rebounds

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY 11 oct. 2007



CARTAGENA, Colombia — The fisherman serving the crab he just plucked from the sea for a couple of beachfront customers is relating a tale that in any other setting would be dismissed as just another big fish story.

His cousin, he says, was swallowed whole by a giant, toothless fish. To illustrate, he makes a slurping sound with such solemn intensity that for an instant, the story seems believable.



Fresh fruit: A palenquera, one of the city's iconic street vendors, pauses outside a Colonial home as she makes

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her morning rounds.

## IF YOU GO

**Getting there:** Most flights require connections through Bogota though Avianca has daily non-stops from Miami. American Airlines begins service between Miami and Barranquilla (about an hour from Cartagena) four times weekly starting Dec. 13. A new agreement between the two countries allows for 42 additional weekly flights, which could be phased in between December and next October.

**Where to stay:** The two major Old City hotels are the 164-room **Sofitel Santa Clara** (011-575-650-4700; [sofitelesantaclara.com](http://sofitelesantaclara.com)) in a beautifully restored 400-year-old convent, with doubles starting at \$320, and the 90-room **Charleston Cartagena Hotel Santa Teresa**, another revamped 19th-century convent (011-575-664-9494; [hoteles-charleston.com](http://hoteles-charleston.com)) with starting rates at \$320. Among elegant boutique hotels: The four-room **Agua** (011-575-664-9479; [hotelagua.com.co](http://hotelagua.com.co)) is both palatial and homey, at \$280-\$300; the new six-room **Casa Quero** in a light, airy 19th-century building (011-57-664-6168; [hotelcasaquero.com](http://hotelcasaquero.com)) starts at \$283. **La Heroica** (011-57-316-5220630; [laheroica.com](http://laheroica.com)) arranges private home rentals for \$500-\$3,500 a day.

**Where to eat:** The city has dozens of good restaurants. **Donde Olano** serves prodigious portions of fresh seafood, also pastas. Specialties are \$11-\$23. Other good bets: **La Vitrola** is a popular spot with lively ambience and a Cuban vibe. **Club de Pesca**, on the ruins of a Spanish fort, serves seafood at waterside tables. **Excursions:** Day trips to the **Rosario Islands**, about an hour off shore, cost about \$25 with lunch and depart from the tourist boat dock. Travel agency **Aviatur** ([aviatur.com](http://aviatur.com)) can arrange tours such as trips to **Tayrona National Park**, four hours north of Cartagena. Guides in the fishing village of **La Boquilla**, four miles north of Cartagena, lead boat tours of the mangrove swamps for about \$10.

**Information:** [www.colombiaespasion.com](http://www.colombiaespasion.com) or [turismocartagenadeindias.com](http://turismocartagenadeindias.com) (in Spanish).

## PHOTOS: [Magical Cartagena](#)

Moments like this abound in Cartagena (Carta-HAY-na), where the absurd and the profound play out against a heartbreakingly beautiful Spanish Colonial backdrop. International jetsetters sip *caipirinhas* in the elegant Sofitel Santa Clara bar, built around an open 17th-century stone crypt. A school group parades through the city's former slave market, hips twitching like rapid machine-gun fire, in a saucy display not witnessed in any U.S. curriculum. Graceful Carmen Mirandas ply the cobblestones proffering succulent fruits from bowls balanced on their heads. And music — salsa and the home-grown cumbia and *vallenato* — pulses ceaselessly through the narrow streets of the 16th-century walled city.

After years of neglect, Cartagena, once the Spanish empire's most important Caribbean port and now the region's loveliest city, is back with a vengeance. As Colombia's most popular tourist haunt, its change of fortune is at the forefront of an image makeover for a country that has been associated more with kidnappings, cartels and cocaine (with, perhaps, a passing nod to Juan Valdez and his donkey) than fun-filled getaways.

Several American cruise lines returned this year after a years-long absence. (They're back despite a U.S. State Department travel warning that, though softened, remains.) Foreigners and nationals are snapping up historic houses in the once-dilapidated Old City. Literary festivals and international congresses are convening. And the movie adaptation of Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, filmed on location and opening in November, is sure to generate more attention.

Colombia's Caribbean coast and its Costeño inhabitants have provided rich fodder for García Márquez's "magical realism" literary style. The author was born near the coast, and he maintains a home in the Old City. Locals quip that he didn't need to dream up his fanciful tales; he merely took notes on daily life here.

Indeed, Costeños are a breed apart, regarded for their boisterous good humor and corrupt politics. Little dramas play out daily in Plaza Bolívar, where chess players hunker intently over their games and shoeshine men swap the latest gossip, and dressed-to-kill fruit vendors, called *palenqueras* for the coastal town most come from, elicit promises of exclusivity from their customers. ("Honey, you belong to me. Don't be unfaithful.")



A rhythmic school group takes to the streets of Cartagena, marching from the Plaza de los Cocheros, site of an early slave market, through the city's narrow Colonial streets.

Hard-bodied dancers wearing next-to-nothing costumes take center stage at the flanks of liberator Simón Bolívar's bronze steed. Bible-thumping evangelists and fervent politicians occasionally join the fray. And tray-toting vendors circulate through the perpetual crowd, hawking tiny cups of strong black coffee, peanuts and cigarettes.

Nearby in the more touristy Plaza Santo Domingo, flirtatious, curvaceous waitresses beckon customers to outdoor tables. Artists display knockoff paintings of Fernando Botero's fat ladies. Mimes, strolling musicians and assorted buskers add to the carnival atmosphere.

## **A surge in upscale renovation**

Though Cartagena, whose population numbers about 1 million, long ago exceeded the confines of the old walled city, its compact historic core, a UNESCO World Heritage site, remains its shining centerpiece. Its narrow, meandering streets are punctuated by pleasant squares ringed by well-tended Spanish Colonial buildings.

Real estate prices here have tripled in recent years, according to some estimates. Many of the centuries-old homes were run-down boarding houses by the 1950s and '60s, when anyone with the means had relocated to the Miami Beach-style high rises of Boca Grande south of the Old City. But in the 1990s, well-heeled Colombians began buying and renovating the colorful, court-yarded buildings, sparking a renaissance that is now coming to full flower. Even in the more humble outer-walled section of Getsemaní, a still rough-around-the-edges neighborhood of smaller homes and high-energy dance clubs, fixer-uppers are selling for \$200,000 to \$500,000, says Patrick Enste, a German transplant whose business booking luxury vacation rentals is booming.

The number of upscale boutique hotels is growing, too. Gustavo Pinto, a Bogotá designer who three years ago opened Agua, the city's first such lodging, initially catered almost exclusively to Europeans and Colombians. Recently, however, more Americans are checking in, he says.

Cartagena's social scene hits a fevered pitch in November, ignited by the Miss Colombia pageant, a much-heralded event that is wholly lacking in irony. (Colombians take their beauty queens very seriously.) The party continues unabated through winter. But the action is focused more around the city's ample cultural assets than its beaches.

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"Beach and golf aren't Cartagena," says Willie Martinez, president of the city's tourist office. "Cartagena is (about) dancing, dining and culture."

The city's main beach at Boca Grande isn't stellar. But Punta Arenas on Tierrabomba Island, five minutes away, sports a more tranquil setting. Island residents peddle fresh oysters, ceviche, coconut confections and muscle-melting massages. Farther out, the fine white beaches of Barú Island include Playa Blanca and Choló, where diners can gorge on fresh crab and lobster ("From the Sea to the Pot to Your Mouth," reads a sign on a fisherman's boat) at tables set in the shallow surf.

## **A downside to paradise**

But for all its earthly delights, Cartagena isn't without flaws. The murder rate increased last year, even as it dropped elsewhere in the country. (The toll includes two Italian tourists killed outside the walled city in February, prompting the addition of 500 police.) One resident says he hasn't been swimming in the bay since a biologist friend warned against it. Touts hustling customers into the mushrooming number of shops that sell emeralds are relentless.

And the gulf between rich and poor is vast. Ana Mercedes Hoyos, a leading Colombian artist known for her paintings of coastal Afro-Colombians, is troubled by the disenfranchisement of the black majority in what was once the New World's largest slave port.

Slavery "was one of the worst cruelties of humanity, and it started in Cartagena," she says. "But it figures so prominently in the history and spirit of the city. I would like to see more opportunities made for (black residents)."

And Cartagena society is so rigidly segmented, it's difficult even for the native-born to break through, says Leonor Espinosa, chef/owner of Leo Cocina y Cava, one of the capital of Bogotá's top restaurants (and listed in *Condé Nast Traveler's* 2006 Hot List). With its fusion of Spanish, African and native Indian cultures, Espinosa regards Cartagena as the birthplace of Colombian cuisine. But with opportunities in her hometown limited, she moved to the capital.

Still, she adds, a bit wistfully, "Cartagena is the most beautiful city in the world. It's magical."

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## Surge in safety, cruises lifts Colombia tourism

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CARTAGENA, Colombia — In a country associated more with narcoterrorists than sybaritic pleasures, leisure travel can be a tough sell.



But Colombia's climate is changing. Security experts no longer routinely warn visitors that if they stray too far from major cities, they might as well schedule their own kidnappings.

Foreign tourist visits are up from a half-million four years ago to 1.2 million now. Kidnappings have dropped by half. (Officials stress that tourists were never a target.)

Many credit tough measures taken by President Alvaro Uribe since his election in 2002. The capital, Bogotá, has shed its aura of danger. New investment in seaside Cartagena has rendered that city more free-wheeling and boisterous than ever. On highways, rifle-toting soldiers man checkpoints, but they seem more friendly than menacing, shaking hands and making small talk before looking in the car trunk.

The U.S. State Department's warning against travel to Colombia, first issued in 1990, was updated in June, noting that although rural areas remain "extremely dangerous," violence has decreased "markedly" in urban areas, including Bogotá and Cartagena.

Europeans, who generally are more impervious than Americans to such cautions, never stopped traveling to the popular hot spot of Cartagena. But Americans account for only 20% of foreign visitors to Colombia, and many of those are visiting relatives.

That's changing with the return of major U.S. cruise lines. During the 2006-07 season (September to May), there were 50 port calls at Cartagena, Santa Marta and San Andrés Island. This season, cruise lines will make 200 stops. Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, which returned to Cartagena in April after a five-year hiatus, will make 43 calls in the next year among its three brands. Princess and Holland America lines also are stopping.

Though cruise passengers aren't as desirable as more free-spending overnight visitors, they can create positive word-of-mouth.

"They go back (home) and tell people, 'It's not what you thought,' " says Colombia's vice minister for tourism, Oscar Rueda.

Royal Caribbean did "due diligence" before deciding to return. "The cruise lines obviously are very cautious," says Maria Sastre, a vice president at Royal Caribbean. "(Cartagena) is a wonderful, unspoiled destination that has tremendous historical value. It offers the cruising passenger a completely new and authentic experience."

Elsewhere in Colombia, other tourist venues are up and coming. Among them:

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- Bogotá will add 7,000 three- to five-star hotel rooms in the next three years.

- The country's first luxury eco-tourism development, in Tayrona National Park, in a spectacular seaside setting with views of 19,000-foot Sierra Nevada peaks, is drawing high-end tourists to a vast wilderness area near Santa Marta (four hours north of Cartagena).

- "Coffee tourism" is flourishing in the coffee-growing region south of Bogotá.

- The southernmost town of Leticia is becoming a popular jumping-off point for trips into the Amazon Basin.

Obviously, travelers shouldn't venture to some places — the guerrilla-occupied jungles of the south, for one. But, as Rueda notes, "there are places everywhere (that) you shouldn't go."

Meanwhile, the country is attempting to rebrand itself with the slogan "Colombia is Passion." The sentiment is aimed as much at its citizens as visitors, Rueda says.

"For a long time, no one loved Colombia — not even Colombians," he says. "Now, Colombians are again proud to be Colombians."

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