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Loving My Time in Cartagena By Jay Newton-Small / Cartagena

"Why are you risking your life for a vacation?" a close friend gasped, aghast when I told her I planned to spend my post-election holiday in [Cartagena, Colombia](#). In fact, few of my friends seemed to think it was a good idea: I couldn't convince any of them to share my rental house in the city's walled Old Town. If they had heard of Cartagena at all, it was only as the backdrop of the classic 1980s romantic caper [Romancing the Stone](#), a place of corrupt juntas and bodice-ripper-reading drug dealers — a parody turned deadly serious by four decades of civil war, Pablo Escobar and the cocaine cartels. But what my friends — who spent their vacations standing in line at Space Mountain or screaming down the Atlantis water slide — failed to realize is that Cartagena has become one of the Caribbean's most charming hidden gems.

Though it is overtly Caribbean, what draws people to this port city is its colonial Spanish soul, best captured perhaps in the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, its most famous resident. If you had any illusions that Garcia Marquez's cilantro-spun stories were fiction, a few days in Cartagena will change your mind. One baby-faced cab driver, looking as if he had just stepped off the pages of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, tells us of his 18 children and 30 grandchildren, many named some iteration of Jose. Characters like these aren't hard to find here. And the cobblestone, bougainvillea-draped Old Town with its bright colors, 18th-century mansions and roving salsa bands is like a spiffed-up fusion of New Orleans and Havana. ([See the 100 best novels of all time.](#))

Cartagena's Old Town was once ransomed to the Spanish crown for two million gold pieces by Sir Francis Drake, and it was for centuries Spain's vault for its vast South American holdings. The city earned the nickname "La Heroica," having endured hundreds of sieges throughout the 17th and 18th centuries — as evidenced by the 400-year-old walls, made of mined coral, that circle the city. But for all of Cartagena's battlements, in the modern era it has been plagued by crime, its potential as a UNESCO World Heritage Site marred by kidnappings and murders. ([See pictures of Colombia's guerrilla army.](#))

In 2002, upon his election, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe made it a priority to secure Cartagena's walls. Emulating London, Uribe installed a 137-camera surveillance system that covers all of the Old Town and tourist areas. Murders dropped from 66 in 2002 to just 23 last year, 10 fewer than in my home town of Washington, D.C. Uribe then lobbied Washington to declare the city safe for U.S. travel, a designation that opened the floodgates to the cruise industry. In the last five years, foreign visitors to Colombia have more than doubled from 1 million a year to 2.6 million. Between 2006 and 2007 alone, the country saw a 13.2% increase in tourism, now Colombia's third largest industry.

"This stability and growth has attracted local and international investors, and even expat Colombians are going home to get in on the action," says Chantal McLaughlin, an editor for [Suzanne's Files](#), a travel, dining and lifestyle website. "A host of new upscale boutique hotels and restaurants have opened there recently, and more are under construction, many in renovated historic townhouses." It's no wonder that travelers are fast discovering this city. During the day, the temperature hovers at an eternal 88 degrees, and the heat rises languidly off the cobblestone streets. Like the locals, you can retreat into the cool, moist refuges of the ancient stone homes, most with walls so thick that air-conditioning becomes redundant. One of my favorite places to chill: Getsemani, the tiny European-style

section of the Old Town — once the poor neighborhood just across the moat, but now the cool Greenwich Village area of the city. Getting around the Old Town is a cinch; cabs cost about 5,000 pesos (\$2.50) anywhere within the walls.

You can also duck in from the heat in any number of Cartagena's cultural gems — from the stunning Museo de Oro (Gold Museum, at Plaza Bolívar) and Museo de Arte Moderno (Museum of Modern Art, right off La Plaza de San Pedro) to the Catedral, which offers an exhaustively comprehensive audio tour for \$8 (we gave up after about 15 minutes). There's also the delightfully twisted Palacio de La Inquisición, which, despite its grand name, is a tiny museum that features some of the many torture devices used to elicit confessions of witchcraft. A 15-minute cab ride away, there's the historic fort, Castillo de San Felipe, built in 1657 and site of the crocodile-filled penultimate scene in *Romancing the Stone*.

If your main objective is to laze on the beach, you'll want to leave town to do it. The beaches near Cartagena tend to be grimy and raucous. Escape by boat instead, from the town's historic port (you can't miss the old touristy galleon whose three masts are visible from much of Old Town), to the Islas De Rosarios, an archipelago about 30 miles (1 hour) off the coast. The islands offer proper beaches — though none quite live up to the postcard-perfect white stretches for which the Caribbean is famous — with snorkeling, scuba diving and a range of restaurants. We snuck onto the Sofitel's private island for a luxurious, leisurely lunch at the hotel's gourmet restaurant under the mangrove trees. Another upscale island destination popular with the Colombian upper classes is Punta Iguana, which feels like a mini South Beach. Less expensive day trip options dotted around the archipelago range from Colombia's version of a swim-up bar and a variety of touristy beaches equipped with cooking huts where freshly caught fish is simply, but succulently, prepared. Everywhere, women tout \$8 massages. Beware if you're sunburned; sand and a vigorous rub can really chafe. In a few places hawkers sell rough strands of pearls — they lack the quality of Asian or Middle Eastern pearls but are still a bargain by U.S. prices. ([See the best places to travel in a recession.](#)) When the sun sets, the true life of Cartagena emerges. This town is a foodie mecca, boasting several excellent restaurants, the most famous of which is La Vitrola (Calle Baloco #2-01; +575-660-07-11), a classic bistro serving Cuban food, where waiters and diners usually end up dancing on the tables before the night is out. Another hot spot, Palma (Calle del Curato #38-137; +575-660-27-96), has a Colombian-Italian fusion menu, across from the luxury Charleston Hotel, an old Santa Teresa convent that has been fully restored; but the restaurant is so wannabe chic that its stark monochromatic decor nearly overwhelms the excellent food. After dinner, the party continues. One can dance on the rooftop of the new boutique Hotel LM (Calle de la Mantilla #3-56; +575-664-91-00) or compete with minor European royalty for a table at the nightclub in the Sofitel Santa Clara (Calle Del Torno #39-29; +575-650-47-00), which occupies another former convent in the San Diego barrio.

There's no shortage of rooms to let in the Old Town. Budget hotels and hostels are mostly clustered in Getsemani. Mid-range and upscale accommodations can be found everywhere, many in El Centro or San Diego; the latter was once a middle class neighborhood that is now peppered with million-dollar homes like the one we rented: 17 of us in a 200-year-old, eight-bedroom blue row house ([Casa Santissimo](#), Barrio San Diego), which goes for \$2,500 per week.

If you still have any anxiety about safety, consider this: when we arrived from the airport in a Hyundai mini-taxi busting at the seams, one of our friends left his wallet, heavy with cash, in the back of the cab. He called around to taxi companies that night, but despaired of ever seeing his billfold again, resigning himself to the tedium of canceled cards and replaced IDs. The next morning a honk sounded out front — the cab driver had returned, sheepishly, handing back the wallet with everything intact, apologizing profusely for not coming sooner. When asked by my astonished friend why he brought it back, the cabbie replied simply that he must, with a look in his eye that spoke volumes of the punishment for stealing from tourists. Rarely have I felt so safe in a city; I didn't hesitate to walk home alone at three in the morning a couple of times my salsa-weary legs got the best of me before my companions tired.

Upon returning to Washington my skeptical friends asked how my trip went. Go now, was my advice, quickly, before Cartagena is overrun by Starbucks, McDonalds and the Hilton — all of which are opening branches there soon. The first time I visited the city — on a business stopover in 2004 — it had a handful of high-rise buildings. Now it has 48, with dozens more under construction. Right now the Cartagena landscape is still shaped by local stores and galleries, Colombian cooking and the open, curious hospitality of a people who haven't yet dealt with pushy hordes of foreign tourists. But they're yearning for the boom that is about to come. At Café del Mar one night — the Cartagena branch of the famed Ibiza beach bar — a bartender quizzed me on how I would describe his city to the people back home. "Tell them," he begged, "tell them it's not like Afghanistan here."

Letting the cool ocean breeze wash over me as I looked out at the Caribbean from the bar's perch on an antique turret, caipirinha in hand and a well-heeled crowd of European and Latin American dancers twisting before me to the ever-present salsa, I couldn't have agreed more: if there exists an antithesis of Afghanistan, Cartagena is it.