

Totally tropical taste

With its enchanting sights and exotic culture, the attractive exterior of Cartagena de Indias in Colombia belies a chequered past. **ALLEGRA HUSTON** explores the tropical city that has shed its demons and is quickly becoming one of the Caribbean's greatest treasures

The emerald glowed sea-green, with murky depths. Unpolished, it held inclusions of silvery pyrite and dull grey, like the dapplings of scattered clouds over clear water. Nearly an inch across, almost cubical, it was a fiercely elemental rock, nothing like the well-mannered little gemstones nestled in cotton wool that lay in orderly ranks elsewhere in the shop. Balancing it on my finger, I imagined it framed, tamed in sinuous tendrils of silver.

Only an inferior-quality stone would be sold uncut; I knew that. But I was buying for nostalgia, not investment. Nostalgia: one of the words that chime like church bells through the novels of Gabriel García Márquez, Cartagena's most famous son; it had seduced me already. By my second day, I was seeing Cartagena through the prism of my imagined memories.

This stone, with its lusciously rough shape, its Caribbean colour, its darkness and brave glitter, held the spirit of the place. I knew that whenever I wore it, I would feel the languid, haunted pulse of Cartagena against my skin.

Like Márquez's books, his city is built as much of time as of stones. Memory, history and the past suffuse Cartagena like a mist. The old city, enclosed within its vast fortifications, unique in the world, is a cobbled retreat of stone-portalled mansions, painted as if by a connoisseur of ice-cream with a particular passion for mango. Buttery stucco domes dot a skyline of wind-whipped

red-tiled roofs, punctuated by squat towers. Inside these old churches, with their macabre saints' relics enclosed in glass and gold beneath the soaring grandeur of bare ribbed stone and limy pastel paint mottling in the humid air, marble grave markers pave the floors, giving the impression that these dead bodies, these past lives, constitute the foundation that holds the city above the waters.

Like Venice, Cartagena is built on a series of islands (though most of the channels have now been filled in). And, like Venice, it is disorientating. Though the streets are roughly grid-like, the old city's shape is an irregular ooze. Especially on a cloudy day, without the sun to guide you, it's hard to tell which way is north, south, east or west. I felt constantly turned around, finding the sea in directions where I didn't expect it. In May, in the turbulent run-up to the rainy season, the Caribbean was dark, choppy, and ominous. Though the weather is steadily hot year-round, at this time of year it is heavy and enveloping. In near 90 per cent humidity, I could have shaken my head like a dog and seen drops of sweat sprinkle the pavement. Surprisingly, it wasn't unpleasant. The mere motion of walking the streets in the rickety shade of the wooden balconies was enough for the sea breeze to cool me.

On every corner, stalls sell little cups of fresh mango spears, and other fruits so exotic they have no English names. Men with machetes hack coconuts into rough goblets of sweet, refreshing water. Threading among them are the *palenqueras* – local village women in coloured ruffles carrying

STREET LIFE
The vibrant mango-
and pink-coloured
houses of Cartagena,
Colombia



NEW WORLD,
OLD WORLD
A shop beneath a
traditional balcony
in the old town

named because, after emancipation, freed slave women sold sugared treats there. A row of sweet stalls remains, as does the scent of the old misery hanging in the air. There is nothing cute about Cartagena; it has the intensity of a Caravaggio painting, and chiaroscuro requires the dark as well as the light.

By the early 20th century, the old quarter was a city of ghosts, overrun by feral dogs and parrots, while the rich decamped to fresher islands. In the Fifties and Sixties, Miami-like high-rises sprang up on a spit of land to the south-west called Bocagrande, in an attempt to replace the newly sombre Havana as the playground of the Caribbean. The colonial mansions were left to crumble invisibly behind the thick coral walls.

In the 1980s, the young rediscovered the old city and began to restore it, shoring up precarious wooden balconies and planting jasmine and fountains in secret courtyards. The first boutique hotel, the beautiful, oriental Hotel Agua, with only six rooms and two improbably enormous palm-trees in the tiny inner courtyard, opened in 1996. Now there are 17, each one different, decorated in styles ranging from Andalusian cowboy and shimmering international spa to hallucinogenic fairy tale.

The city, cosmopolitan though it is today, with its literary festival, Hay Festival Cartagena, film festival (one of the oldest in the world) and world-class music festival, is textured by the entropy of the tropics. The life force is also the force of decay and breakdown, the agent of hectically desultory change from one state into another. Paint peels into a palimpsest of colours; unruly vines seem to hold up the balconies while insinuating themselves into the structures and weakening them from within.

fruit on their heads like Carmen Miranda. In the neighbouring district of Getsemaní, where in the old days the working classes lived, young men with contraptions like old Singer sewing-machines sell juices with shaved ice. Up on the bastions, as spacious as plazas, there are sprawled cafés with bands playing salsa, merengue and reggaeton, with sofas to lounge on while you sip rum and the local liquor – anise-flavoured aguardiente – as the equatorial sun plunges into the distant waves.

Cartagena was founded in 1533, deep in the heart of an almost impregnable bay, whose entrance, in classic pirate-story fashion, could be closed off by a chain between two forts. It soon became the loading bay for the treasure of the Spanish Americas – the gold of the Incas, sugar and silver – and slaves who, in return, worked the mines and plantations. Along with Veracruz in Mexico (which doubled for Cartagena in the film *Romancing the Stone*), it was the only slave market accredited by the Spanish crown. Straight off the ships, the doomed Africans

were marched through the clocktower gate, branded twice (once for their trader, once to show the tax had been paid) and sold. The old slave market is now known blandly as Plaza de los Coches; just beyond it is El Portal de los Dulces, the Road of Sweets, so

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO

The Cartagena International Music Festival runs from 4 to 13 January (www.cartagena-music-festival.com); the Hay Festival (an offshoot of the Hay-on-Wye literary festival) runs from 26 to 29 January (www.hayfestival.com/cartagena); and the film festival runs from 23 to 29 February (www.ficcifestival.com).

WHERE TO EAT

La Cocina de Pepina in Getsemaní (the working-class colonial district), with only six tables. Diners are treated to an incredible array of traditional local dishes from former sociology professor turned chef María Josefina. Great ceviche and fish can be found at Club de Pesca (www.clubdepesca.com) and Cande (+57 5 668 5291).

Head to Tcherassi Hotel & Spa (www.tcherassihotels.com) for gourmet-spa food. The city's current hot spot is El Santísimo (www.elsantisimo.com).

SECRET AGENT

Charming Ricardo Hernandez Caballero can arrange visits to anywhere, including boat rides to outlying islands and sailing to Panama. Book through Tim

Leggott at Global Artichoke (01886 853920; www.globalartichoke.com).

WHERE TO DRINK AND DANCE

Watch the sunset at Cafe del Mar (www.cafedelmarcartagena.com), on the ramparts of the city wall (try margaritas, Colombian rum or anise-flavoured aguardiente). Later, go to El Baluarte (www.baluartesanfranciscojavier.com)

The pavements, even in this glamorous enclave, have those inexplicable Third World concrete eruptions that make window-shopping an extreme sport. What is lost, as it is in all stories of the tropics, is order, discipline, control. Who can mourn them? The plunder, warfare and piracy that built Cartagena de Indias have been transmuted by heat and time into romance.

The city is shot through with endearments like a fabric laced with silver thread: 'Querido.' 'Corazón.' 'Mi vida.' 'Muñeca.' 'Mi amor.' (Beloved. Heart. My life. Doll. My love.) From what I could hear, with my bad Spanish, this is how all *Cartagenos* talk naturally. Ordinary words get affectionate endings, as if they're being chucked under the chin; I heard people making arrangements to meet 'esta nochecita' (this little night), and completing a purchase by saying 'vamos a pagarito' (let's do a little paying now). Shopkeepers will call you 'querida' (beloved); street vendors give you change with the words 'Gracias, mi amor.' The gun embrasures in the vast walls each hold, at sunset, a pair of embracing lovers.

You can't fall in love with something perfect. A hard surface repels; there are no chinks that let you in. We love things for their flaws: their marks of age, their fragility, their inclusions of darkness, the precious ordinary moments snatched from time. Three months later, my ring is yet to be made. I carry the stone around with me, like a lover's promise. □

Three nights at Tcherassi Hotel & Spa in Cartagena and two nights at Agua Barú (see below right) costs from about £2,070 a person, including international flights, transfers, and a guide in Cartagena, with Global Artichoke (01886 853920; www.globalartichoke.com).

REST OF THE BEST: Cartagena hotel hotspots



Best for PERSONAL SERVICE

Hotel Agua
This jewel-like hotel with only six rooms was the first boutique hotel in old Cartagena, and it is one of the dreamiest places in the city. There is a lovely pool on the roof where you can take the edge off the heat. Get Sergio, the owner, to tell you the hilarious story of how he got the enormous palm-trees into the central courtyard. Doubles, from about £400 a night B&B (+57 5 664 9479; www.hotelagua.com.co).



Best for FIVE-STAR LUXURY

Sofitel Santa Clara
The grand five-star option. A beautiful converted monastery (it's the convent featured in García Márquez's *Of Love and Other Demons*), it has a large sumptuous annex and an enormous pool. It has little colonial balconies, perfect for sipping your aperitif on, and parrots roost in the jungle of the central courtyard, chirruping cheerfully. From £210 a room a night B&B (+57 5 650 4700; www.sofitel.com).



Best for RELAXATION

Hotel El Marques
As one of the larger boutique hotels, it has a spacious courtyard lined with palm-trees and a rustic fountain that is especially idyllic at breakfast time. Below ground, there's an old wine cellar for delicious private dinners with Peruvian food a speciality. The brightly tiled swimming pool is surrounded by wooden balconies and pretty ferns. Doubles, from about £205 a night B&B (+57 5 664 4438; www.elmarqueshotelboutique.com).



Best for EXTRAVAGANT DESIGN

La Passion Hotel
Thierry, the owner and a French screenwriter, has created an art nouveau fantasy fortress. Strange, beautiful, wonderful; this small hotel has a twisting stone staircase and antique tiled floors. The rooftop, awash with potted plants, twinkly lights and a swimming pool, is the ideal place to relax and watch the sunset. From about £90 a room a night B&B (+57 5 664 8605; www.lapassionhotel.com).



Best LOVERS' HIDEAWAY

Agua Barú
The sister property of Hotel Agua (above), Agua Barú is about 45 minutes by boat from Cartagena. With three gorgeous bungalows (two share a pool, the other has its own), it is scattered over a hillside in a sheltered, pristine bay. With delicious food and total privacy, this is the place to hole up for a honeymoon or a romantic weekend. From about £290 a bungalow a night B&B (+57 5 664 9479; www.hotelagua.com).

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