



## Fall Travel: Why Cartagena, Colombia Should be Top of Your List

By Carole Dixon

Colombia has given the world a wide range of talents from Nobel prize-winning, poetic author Gabriel García Márquez to bombshell actress Sophia Vergara, so it has been exciting in recent years to see this destination creep up on top 10 travel lists and no longer as a crime-ridden no-fly zone with a dark history.

Situated on a bay in the Caribbean Sea, one of the country's top draws is the thriving port city of Cartagena. This World Heritage Site founded by Pedro de Heredia in 1533, is steeped in pirate lore, with colonial architecture protected by the most complete set of fortifications in South America.

Everyone from Will Smith – who we recently spotted on location making a film – to the cast of Bravo's *Real Housewives of New York City*, have frolicked in the irresistible and picturesque streets. This town is so hot right now that it's almost in danger of becoming a South American Cabo San Lucas – with the recent influx of tourism. Add in the fact that it's only a short one-hour flight on Avianca airlines from Bogota – which will take you about 6 hours from LAX, and there is only a 2-hour time difference.

Once you arrive from a 20-minute airport shuttle trip, driving around the Walled City of Cartagena de Indias, might not be the seaside town you were expecting. The perimeter looks large and imposing like they might still be trying to ward off the pirates behind those walls, but the interior structure holds a charming, Colonial masterpiece that is reminiscent of good time New Orleans and tropical Jamaica mixed with a little rough-and-tumble Cuba. Boutique hotels blend in with 400-year-old homes sprouting tiny terraces draped in Bougainvillea, cafes and stunning courtyards abound filled with artists, expats, and vacationers sipping the famous coffee or rum cocktails.



It's very easy to navigate the well-worn cobblestone streets on foot, taxi or by horse-drawn buggy, but no matter which transportation mode you choose, you'll want to end up at **Casa San Agustín** – a member of **Leading Hotels of the World** – located in the Old City, or Downtown (Centro) area of Cartagena.

From the moment you pass the large wooden gates that lead to a courtyard reception, it feels like a grand private home. The central pool features a jaw-dropping ancient aqueduct surrounded by 20 guest rooms and 10 suites that make up the property constructed with three restored XVII century whitewashed Colonial-era homes with Romeo and Juliet balconies.

The private abode esthetic continues to the guest rooms which are all fitted with bespoke furnishings commissioned by local artisans from the chandeliers to ironwork beds that are fitted with Frette linens. For a local affair, a variety of suites offer living room areas and private patios with a Jacuzzi.

Throughout your stay, you will keep finding nods to the 17th-century history as a Spanish stronghold from the original frescoes in the Library, wood-beamed ceilings, tiles, sconces throughout the public spaces, library, rooftop bar and sundeck.



Another reason to make this your home for a visit is the acclaimed **Alma Restaurant** run by one of the most celebrated chefs in the country, Heberto Eljach. Boasting another enviable indoor-outdoor leafy courtyard setting, where you can linger all day or at night while ordering traditional fare and listening to live music on the patio or a DJ in the bar area. There is a separate entrance to the restaurant from the street, so even non-guests can pop-in easily for a romantic or lively meal, depending on the night.

Chef Eljach is known for his refined classic Colombian dishes from seafood casserole, ceviche, prime aged beef, and lobster tail. Speaking of crustaceans, one item that you must order is the lobster empanadas. The flaky pastry is perfectly cooked, like a savory pie that is not too dense or chewy, and comes with guacamole and few other spicy sauces for dipping.



For breakfast, be sure to indulge in a typical Colombian feast that includes arepas (a pita looking bread made with maize dough or cooked flour) with eggs stuffed inside the pastry – almost like a hot pocket – alongside fried yucca, potatoes, sausage, cheese and salsa which are all typical side dishes for a hearty start to the day. And, you must try the famous Colombian black coffee even if you think it will be too strong. The hotel can even arrange a tasting with **Café San Alberto** where you will learn about the history, customs and how to taste and drink these magical beans. This coffee is so smooth you will not even need to doctor it with sugar or dairy products.

Once you're caffeinated and fortified, time to hit the sites. Thanks to the local government the town is safe, clean and colorful teeming with preserved historic buildings, cathedrals, world-class shopping and dining.

The best way to get your bearings is by taking a three-hour walking tour of Old Town Cartagena with **Galavanta Taylored Travel**. The guides are all knowledgeable and charming locals, so you are in good hands.

You'll visit the Plaza San Pedro Claver and also San Felipe de Barajas Castle. The site has a long dramatic steep entrance that leads to bunkers and a maze of tunnels and is the most formidable defensive complex of Spanish military architecture. Other notable sites include the Cathedral of Cartagena de Indias, one of the oldest Episcopal churches in the Americas. Construction began in 1577, finished in 1612, its dome a symbol of Cartagena's skyline and resilience to this day.

You'll pass plenty of street musicians, artists, and vendors, all speaking Palenquero which is the Spanish-based creole language spoken in Colombia, but Spanish and English are also widely used. Be sure to buy a few colorful hand-made woven bags, head scarves or wooden jewelry. For something a little more durable and impressive, this is also a fantastic place to buy emeralds and there seem to be plenty of jewelry stores in this tiny town who are willing to make you a 'good deal!' Guests can also book the hotel's personal shopper, who can give an insider tour of the city's best and most authentic boutiques for clothing, accessories, handmade crafts and souvenirs.



You'll also encounter many colorfully dressed women balancing impossibly large bowls of fruit on their heads as seen in many postcards and travel brochures. Most of the ladies are very friendly and welcome picture snapping or selfies with them but be sure to tip at least a few dollars.

Culinary tours can also be arranged for an authentic taste of Cartagena beyond the hotel's own acclaimed restaurant. A few top restaurants around for ceviche inspired menus include hole-in-the-wall La Cevicheria and more expensive 25-seat **El Bolchén**, but if you want something a little more chef-driven, with wine or cocktail pairings, try **Carmen**.

Chef Carmen Angel graduated from UC Santa Cruz before studying gastronomy at Le Cordon Blue in San Francisco but has lived in Colombia for almost a decade with her husband and you'll be happy she relocated to enjoy the local food. Expect seabeas ceviche with coconut tiger milk shrimp, black miso soup with coconut yam and local cheese, grilled seabeas with honey and passion fruit on a bed of coconut rice, bibimbap with foie gras sauce and truffle.

After a long lunch and more shopping or site seeing, you want to watch the sunset over the sea, Café del Mar is a top spot for cocktails but get there early to avoid a wait. If you prefer a view over the city, try the **Charleston Santa Teresa**, which is a more upscale 5-star hotel with a rooftop view Italian themed eatery, La Terraza, over the city and a few cathedrals.

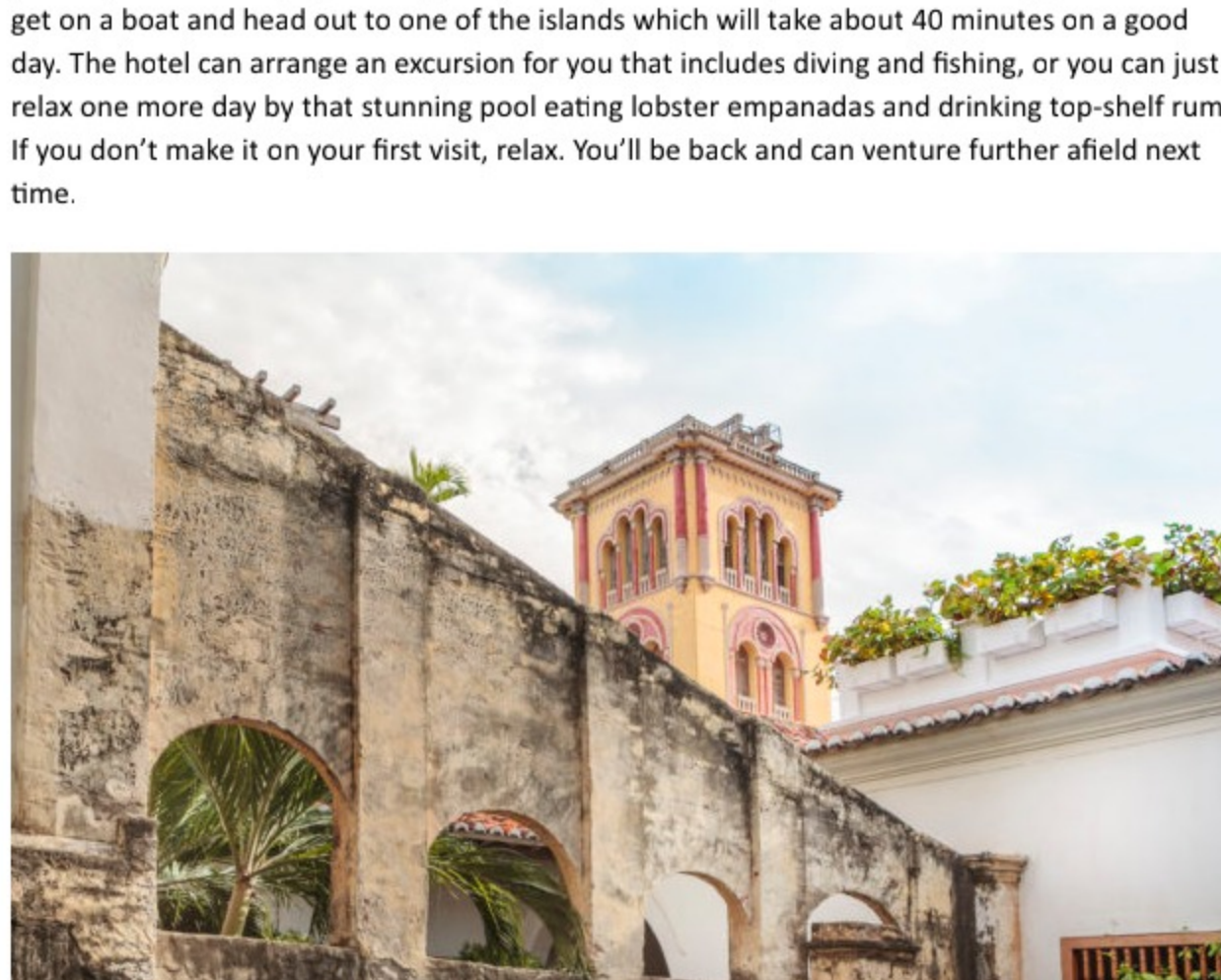
You can also arrange for a high-end rum tasting at **El Barón Café & Liquor Bar** at Plaza San Pedro Claver in Old Town via Galavanta Taylored Travel or a private estate style property where chocolates will be paired with your libations.

For a lighter casual meal, try tapas at **Don Juan** but for something a little more lively with serious food portions, try **Candé** with live dancing and a Creole influence. You'll find many restaurants like this in town that feature rice dishes, seafood stews, and plantains as cornerstones of the main meal.



After all your excursions, book a treatment back at Casa San Agustín at the newly opened **AURUM Spa** which was inspired with gold and natural elements, paying homage to Cartagena's pirate tales of buried treasure. The spa holds four treatment rooms, a hammam, soaking tub, nail salon room, and a relaxation room. The spa offers massages and facials that use local ingredients and mystical practices for relaxation. Try the Pure Gold Massage, the Wild Lime Scalp Treatment or the Cartagena Coffee Body Scrub. Some of the ingredients you will find in your treatment include Colombian coffee, pure tobacco, volcanic mud, horse chestnut and sea salt. The spa's oils, lotions, and aromatherapy are sourced from Naturopathica, an organic, botany-based skincare line inspired by traditional Naturopathic medicine.

After a few days of wandering the streets of the old town sightseeing, you might want to get out of the city. While surrounded by a body of Caribbean water, one major misconception is that Cartagena is a beach town. The local beaches are, well, mostly for locals and not the picture postcard imagery one might expect. If you're looking for that island vibe, you'll need to get on a boat and head out to one of the islands which will take about 40 minutes on a good day. The hotel can arrange an excursion for you that includes diving and fishing, or you can just relax one more day by that stunning pool eating lobster empanadas and drinking top-shelf rum. If you don't make it on your first visit, relax. You'll be back and can venture further afield next time.



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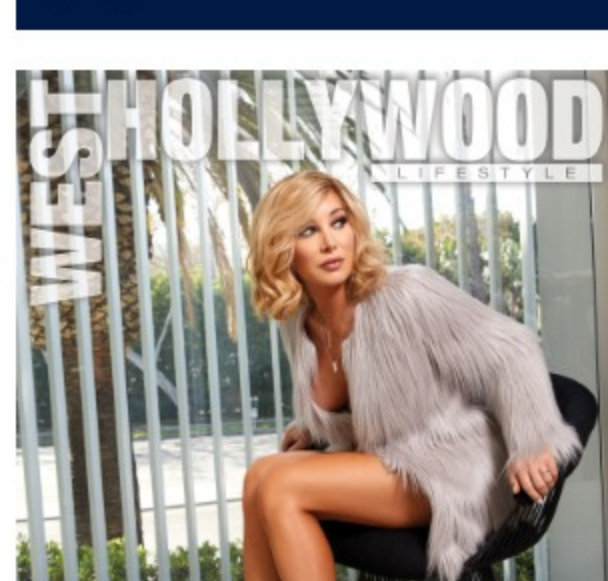


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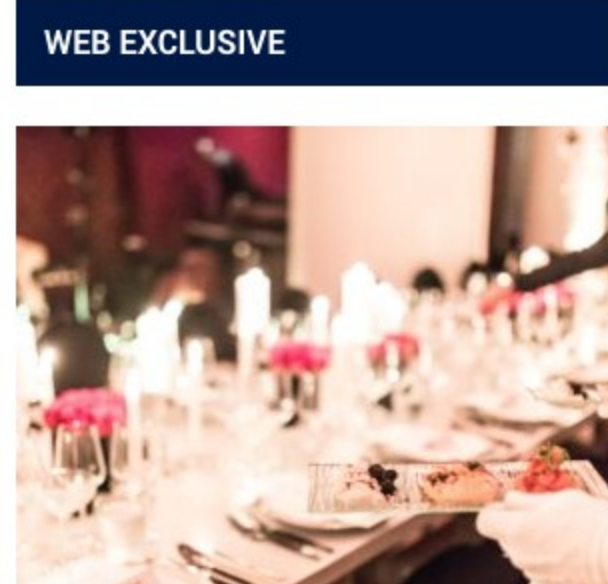
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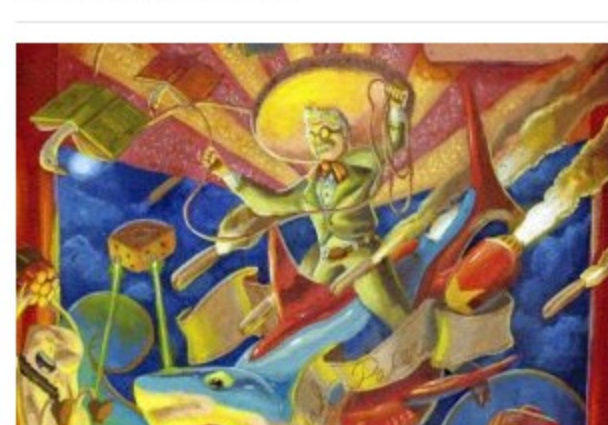
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