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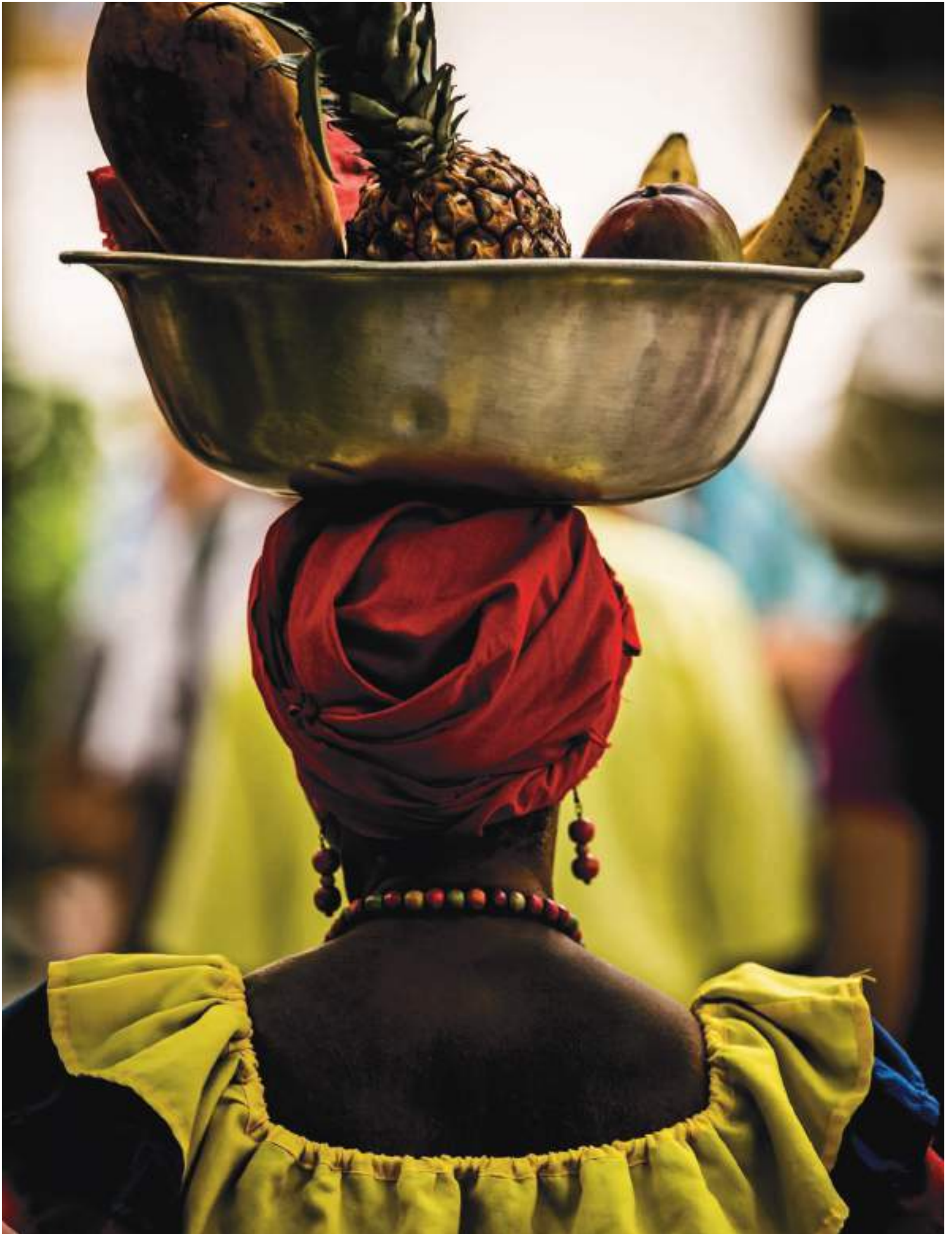
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**PIRATES CAME TO CARTAGENA FOR
THE TREASURE BUT IT'S THE
SOUL-SHAKING, BODY-ROCKING GROOVE
THAT NOW MAKES THIS THE
CARIBBEAN'S MOST ALLURING CITY**

**BY STANLEY STEWART
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID CROOKES**





IN CARTAGENA GOLD HAS

been out of the news for a couple of centuries or more. Time was, it was all people talked about. But really, since the Napoleonic wars, conversation has shifted to more mundane matters: independence, a civil war, the drug trade, American imperialism.

But then suddenly, just a couple of months ago, gold was back. The Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos, flew down to Cartagena to call a news conference in the shadow of the great fortress built to keep English pirates at bay. A Spanish galleon, the *San José*, had been found offshore. Described as the Holy Grail of shipwrecks, she was sunk by the British in 1708 and was said to contain, in the breathless words of the president himself, the largest haul of gold ever found. He put the value at £662 million. For once Santos was being modest. Other sources say the value may run into the billions.

For Cartagena it was like old times, this fervent talk of ships and gold and fortunes. Gold made this city. It made the Spaniards rich, and the hunger for the metal

Above: a view across Cartagena's old town; playing draughts in Mercado Basurto. Opposite, a close shave. Previous pages: fruit for sale; the pool at Casa San Agustin, set in a group of colonial buildings



destroyed the indigenous tribes along this coast. Gold sent men to their deaths in the interior and drew cut-throats and buccaneers from halfway round the world to its shores. Galleons laden with bullion funded several European wars, including the Armada's attempted invasion of England. Gold made Cartagena a city of mansions, the Queen of the Spanish Main, the richest city in the Americas.

Cartagena de Indias remains a 16th-century treasure of cobbled streets and pastel-coloured walls, of arcaded squares and elegant promenades on the Caribbean coast. In the old walled city – among the colonial villas and the sprawling monasteries – there is the haunting echo of gold at every turn. For centuries, the life of this city was one long raid on its own good fortune: the gold that flowed through it from across South America, a blessing and a curse.

Anyone who has read Gabriel García Márquez will be familiar with the atmosphere in Cartagena: the steamy coastal heat, the clip-clop of hooves, the crumbling mansions, the sweet sound of salsa snaking around street corners, the elaborate family histories, the secrets, the plots, the ghosts, and the unlikely twists of fate; the charm, the corruption, the sensuality and the sweaty tropical promise of misadventure and misalliance.

Street vendors trundle their carts over the cobblestones, selling mango juice, cigars and hats. Tall studded doors with knockers the size of cannonballs swing open to offer glimpses of courtyards with fountains and palm trees. Churches, barnacled with gold and statues, sail like galleons above the tiled roofs. Atop the city walls, lovers sit astride cannons that famously failed to fend off pirates while high above



A bedroom at Casa San Agustin. Below, dancer at one of the city's many street festivals. Opposite, the Casa Don Sancho hotel



frigate birds and pelicans sail on the trade winds that carried them to the gates of this city.

'Cartagena was like the woman everyone desired,' said Fernando Rivera, my friend and guide. 'She was rich beautiful, and wayward. The English, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, they all tried.' For visitors, this is Colombia's calling card, still the most beautiful Spanish colonial city in the Americas.

As a country, this is South America's debutante, emerging from years of seclusion. For decades a civil war, handed down over generations from fathers to sons like an heirloom, kept travellers away. But the good news is the war is over. There are peace talks, and the country is newly confident about its future. Expatriates who went abroad in the bad years are eagerly returning home and Colombia is full of entrepreneurial energy.

VISITORS ARE astonished by the diversity. There are Andean peaks and dry cowboy prairies, rolling green coffee country and two coasts, Caribbean and Pacific. There are rustic haciendas, remote tribes and cities throbbing with salsa. And there is Cartagena, already old when Captain Cook set off to find Australia.

In truth, the city was never really a part of Colombia's troubles. In this, as in so much else, it is a place apart. Rivera's family moved here from Bogotá when he was 10 to find peace.

'It was like a liberation,' he says. 'I was suddenly free to go anywhere. My mother was no longer afraid. I ran to school with the other boys in the mornings. We climbed the old walls. We played football in the streets until late in the evening. There was never any trouble here. And the people were different,' he says. 'Warmer, friendlier, easier; people of the coast.'

We have come to the neighbourhood of Getsemaní where Rivera grew up. The old walled centre of Cartagena has undergone considerable gentrification – many of the colonial mansions have become smart hotels and restaurants, wine bars and boutiques. But Getsemaní, always a poorer neighbourhood, is still a little shabby, and it is here that Cartagena's traditional atmosphere is at its most vibrant.

'I want to show you my living room when I was a child,' Rivera says. We are in Plaza de la Santísima Trinidad, a square in front of a plain façade of an old church. It is late afternoon and the town is waking.

Through the hot afternoons, Cartagena dozes behind its shutters. In courtyards, among the parrots and the palms, rocking chairs creak and hammocks swing. But with the cooling evening, life is breathed back into the town. People emerge, pulses quicken. The music starts again.

It is at this hour that most of Getsemaní converge on the plaza, taking their places on the benches and along the raised stone walls. They come to sit and talk, to swap news and jokes, to drink beer and eat warm empanadas, to argue, gossip and flirt. Food stalls are wreathed in delicious aromas and clouds of smoke. Young boys play football with an empty plastic water bottle, back-heeling it with studied insouciance. Old men huddle over chess and dominoes, slapping the counters down with a theatrical flourish. Waiters polish glasses for café tables spilling across the pavements. A radio is tuned to salsa and women dance together in hip-swinging unison.





AS THE BAND PLAYS, AN EROTIC CHARGE

Up the street a band tunes their instruments in the Café Havana as punters queue at the horseshoe bar for Mojitos. Café Havana is the salsa bar you have always dreamt of and never thought you'd find. It is splendidly 1930s, as funky and retro as a vintage Oldsmobile. The wood-panelled walls are lined with old black-and-white photographs of great musicians. Big-bladed ceiling fans turn slowly. Ranks of bottles gleam as bar tenders crush mint, juice limes and pour rum. Everyone is in a good mood and wearing a Panama hat.

Then the band starts to play, and an erotic charge goes round the room like electricity. If you thought of salsa as good clean fun, think again. The idea of dancing as a vertical expression of a horizontal desire might have been born here in the Café Havana. It is hot and sexy but never crude. With fluid hips, couples swim through the music. And after a few more Mojitos, so do I.

THE NEXT morning I nurse my hangover in the shady Plaza de Bolívar. A fountain plays. A statue of Simón Bolívar, the great South American liberator, astride an impressive steed, trots among the palm trees. Locals rest on benches, mopping their brows, while itinerant head masseurs, shoeshine merchants and portrait photographers ply their trades. On one corner

of the square is the Palacio de la Inquisición, now a museum. It records the religious fever, still current in the 18th century, when Catholics were the world's violent fundamentalist fanatics. The prosecution's traditional opening question – 'When did you become a witch?' – rather sets the tone. For the accused, innocence was never an option.

Set around a ground-floor room in the museum there are persuasive arguments for telling the prosecutors whatever they wanted to hear: the Mesa de Torturas or the Rack, El Aplosta Cabeza, a head vice to squeeze the brain slowly out through the ears, and La Hanguilla del Hereje, a dastardly collar-and-knife arrangement meant to keep you awake night and day. Should you nod off, your throat would be slit from ear to ear.

A more merciful God can be found in the city's splendid cathedral, built a century before St Paul's, in spite of the best efforts of Sir Francis Drake. In Cartagena they still curse the name of El Draque. When I mention him to my taxi driver, he almost drives into a ditch.

Drake's fleet hove into view on Ash Wednesday of 1586 flying black flags. A thousand chaps with eyepatches and West Country accents descended on the town for 48 days of pillage. Eventually Drake consented to go away, but only if they gave him as much gold as he could carry. To help focus minds, he set up several cannons



GOES AROUND THE ROOM LIKE ELECTRICITY

in the Plaza de Bolívar aimed at the cathedral. Cartagenans compare Drake unfavourably to their own Blas de Lezo, a noble and heroic figure who had a number of nicknames, including Patapalo (Pegleg) and Mediohombre (Half-man). He lost his left leg to an English cannon ball in the War of Spanish Succession. At the Defence of Toulon it was the turn of his left eye. At the Siege of Barcelona, he sacrificed his right arm. The year 1741 found him in Cartagena as English ships appeared over the horizon. Ever the hero, old Blas managed to hold off 25,000 English attackers with only 2,500 men. But sadly he lost his remaining leg in the battle and died the following year.

AROUND THE corner from Cartagena's cathedral is the Museo del Oro, the gold museum, where the dimly lit rooms share a similar ecclesiastical hush. A security guard stands by the door, cradling a rifle. Visitors shuffle and stare, slack-jawed. In the illuminated cases, delicate jewellery gleams like pure points of light.

The indigenous Zenú people of this coast were master goldsmiths, and their ornaments and figures are displayed with the reverence due to works of art. For them it had a spiritual rather than economic

value. In the hands of Zenú craftsmen, gold was a medium for metaphor and meanings.

'They were buried with their gold,' Rivera whispers, 'usually beneath trees. They hung bells on the branches so the wind made them chime. When the Spanish arrived, they simply followed the sound of the bells.'

The museum holds the treasures that escaped the Spaniards. There are fantastical animals and insects, gorgeous pendants in the form of birds with their wings spread. There are images of metamorphosis: men transforming into mythic creatures. There are earrings with the delicacy of spider webs. Suspended in one of the cases are dozens of winged filigree brooches, like a rising cloud of golden butterflies caught in shafts of light.

The arrival of the Spaniards spelt the end of Zenú civilisation. The conquistadors plundered the ancestral tombs beneath the trees and enslaved those tribespeople who had not succumbed to European diseases.

But some things persist. In the interior, among the Mestizos population, you still hear legends about the mythical creatures, half man and half alligator, who live beneath the waters of lakes in spectacular palaces of pure gold. And in the seas in front of the old walled city, salvage experts are at work trying to determine how to raise the *San José*. Cartagena is back where it began, a city abuzz with news of gold. T

Above from left: La Cevicheria; the town's cathedral, which was once attacked by Sir Francis Drake; grilled seafood and curry at La Cevicheria; a house in the Getsemani barrio

Outside the Soviet-themed KGB bar near Parque Fernandez Madrid



STRIKE IT RICH

WHERE TO EAT

Colombian cooking now rivals that of Peru in South American foodie circles. In a country with every kind of habitat and climate, menus are full of exotic fruits and vegetables, as well as first-rate meats and fish from both the Atlantic and the Pacific. All this with young, energetic chefs who have returned home after training abroad, fizzing with ideas and influences.

CARMEN

Set in an elegant colonial building, this has a choice of three spaces: a courtyard with fountains and plants; a roof terrace with stunning views and a more formal (air-conditioned) dining room. Californian chef Rob Pevitts explores the diversity of local ingredients while throwing in a few Asian twists. Try the sea-bass fillet, smoked at your table with carbonised coconut, served on plantain 'sand' and accompanied by banana and rum risotto with the lightest lemon foam. *carmencartagena.com*. Five-course tasting menu from about £30

LA COCINA DE PEPINA

My favourite Cartagena restaurant: just eight tables, lots of locals and a portrait of Gabriel García Márquez (a long-time regular) on the wall. It began with María Josefina Yances Guerra, one of the country's great chefs and restaurateurs, who believed in keeping traditional cooking alive. Now run by her nephew, this is a place with few pretensions and stunning food (Caribbean soups, swordfish ceviche, *mote de queso*). If you were Colombian the dishes would remind you of the wonderful dinners your grandmother served. *facebook.com/lacocina.depepina*. About £20 for two

MARIA

Alejandro Ramirez has worked everywhere – Mexico City, Prague, Tokyo, France and London with Gordon Ramsey (a pussycat, apparently) – before returning two years ago to open Maria, in the heart of Cartagena's walled city. The high-ceiling room has banquettes beneath Pop Art prints by Cartalina Estrada; the menu includes warm octopus carpaccio with leek compôte and an asparagus and chilli sauce. *mariacartagena.com*. About £40 for two

EL BOLICHE CEBICHERIA

Small and delightful with only seven wooden tables and an aquarium of clams, this was the first *cevicheria* in Cartagena (also see La Cevicheria, nearby, on Calle 7). Owners Oscar Colmenares and Viviana Díaz saw the potential in serving the freshest fish caught by local fishermen. Having trained in the Michelin-starred kitchen of Martin Berasategui's San Sebastián restaurant, Colmenares is a returning exile, all fired up about his country's food potential. Go for the giant prawn with butifarra sausage and quail's eggs in a creamy fish broth. +57 5 660 0074. About £15 for two

DEMENTE

Nicolas Wiesner worked in international finance until he decided to re-evaluate his priorities. Now he's found a new life as proprietor of a tapas bar in the funky, up-and-coming neighbourhood of Getsemaní, on a corner of the wonderful Plaza de la Santísima Trinidad. In tune with the rest of this district, he has kept the unreconstructed exterior and bare stone walls, adding reclaimed wooden tables and rocking chairs, a serious rum cellar and Cuban cigars. There's also a wood-fired Italian pizza oven in the courtyard next door. +57 317 441 1037. About £25 for two

EL PESCADOR DE COLORES

This chilled beach club – something completely different for Cartagena – is reached by boat, which whisks you across the bay to Isla Barú. It was opened recently by Lina, a Colombian woman, and Portia, a Brit, and has cool Latin sounds, cushioned four-poster Bali beds, loungers fashioned from old canoes and a great open-air restaurant. The look is driftwood salvage; the food is Franco-Colombian, such as moules in a blue-cheese sauce. *elpescadordecolores.com*. About £30 for two

WHERE TO STAY

The city's architecture – all courtyards and arcades and balconies – mean that an intense and wonderful atmosphere is built in. All the best places to stay are several hundred years old, and the very best probably have pirates' bones bricked up in a wall somewhere.

CASA SAN AGUSTIN

The top boutique hotel in the old walled city, this is also one of the newest (it opened in 2012). Three 18th-century houses have been knocked through to form one glorious space. It's worthy of its five-star rating: nothing is overlooked here, and the staff are tremendous. An L-shaped pool in the courtyard flows beneath the city's former aqueduct. Upstairs is a library with deep armchairs and an honesty bar. Rooms are big with iPads, canopied beds and marble-tiled bathrooms. The street-level Alma restaurant is excellent: eat while watching the horse-drawn carriages rattling past. +57 5 681 0000; *hotelcasasanagustin.com*. Doubles from about £275

BASTION

The design team here have not only preserved another lovely colonial building, they have reinvigorated it with bare brick walls, steel, dark wood and luminously pale fabrics. A purple-flowering almendro tree stands in the gravelled courtyard; leather sofas and dark antique trunks acknowledge Cartagena's historic vibe. The best addition is the rooftop terrace with its infinity pool, canopied day beds and fine views over the city to the sea beyond. +57 5 642 4100; *bastionluxuryhotel.com*. Doubles from about £240

SANTA CLARA

Set in a 17th-century convent, this Sofitel-owned hotel is a sprawling place near the old sea walls, steeped in history and with enough passageways and internal balconies to please any fan of historic Spanish architecture. Plus it has everything a big-hitting hotel should offer: a top-notch spa and gym, swimming pools, a serious art collection and tip-top service. The courtyards are more like exotic tropical gardens – perfect for an afternoon or evening cocktail. *sofitel.com*. Doubles from about £245

CASA DON SANCHO

Once owned by the governor who surrendered to the French in 1697, in the street that also carries his name, this lovely place is immensely proud of its aristocratic connections. The drawing room on the first floor has fine books and music, the dining room has a splendid balcony for that after-dinner Cohiba and an outside pool is framed by pillars and Romanesque arches. The look is smart but contemporary, with a deft balance of wood, tiles and plaster, and sunny terraces of greenery. +57 566 86622; *casadonsancho.com*. Doubles from about £140

CASA DE INDIAS

Just a few doors away from Casa don Sancho, this is an altogether more bohemian affair with lots of colour, labyrinthine spaces, quirky design touches and a clutter of arty objects that give this 10-bedroom house a lavish and slightly decadent vibe. The courtyard pool is framed by exuberant foliage, and you can always find unexpected nooks and terraces. It can also be taken as a whole. +57 566 44361; *hotelcasaindiacatalina.com*. Doubles from about £55

TRE PASOS DE LA HAVANA

A favourite with New Yorkers who fly down for the weekend on the new direct flights. Families and groups of friends take the whole 200-year-old house, which has five ensuite bedrooms, a long lap pool, and modern touches from Bogotá-based designers Meteoro Estudio. It's cool, it's convenient, and it is what it says: three steps from Cartagena's best salsa club, the Café de Havana. *airbnb.com/rooms/4776373*. About £850 per night (sleeps 10)

GETTING HERE

Plan South America (+44 20 7993 6930; www.plansouthamerica.com) can organise a five-night trip to Cartagena from £2,956 per person, staying at the Casa San Agustín. This includes return flights from London to Bogotá and domestic flights to Cartagena, as well as all ground transfers, a boat trip to the Pescador de Colores restaurant and a speedboat tour of the islands. SS