

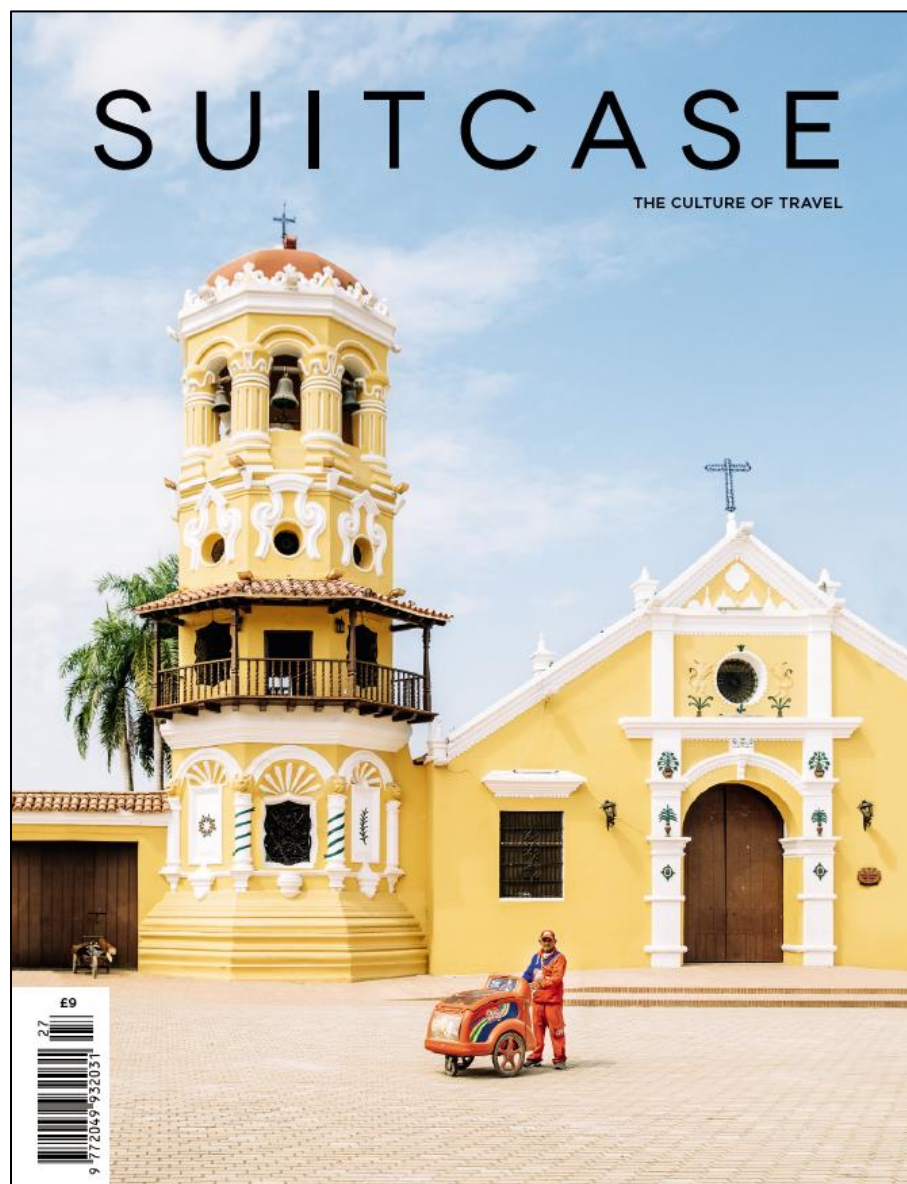
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Magical Thinking

Retracing the steps of Colombia's most famous writer, Gabriel García Márquez, through the colonial towns, banana plantations and carnival rhythms of his homeland

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Every January for the past 14 years the world's most famous literary festival, Hay, has decamped from the Welsh countryside to the vibrant Colombian city of Cartagena de Indias. The reason for this transatlantic transplant? "That's simple," Peter Florence, Hay's founder, smiles ruefully. "Gabo (aka the Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez) refused to get on a plane, so we decided to bring the festival to him." While Gabo may have died five years ago, his spirit is still very much alive, both at Hay and in the Colombian Caribbean at large.

As I travelled to take part in this year's festival with my latest documentary about Colombia, I was assailed by nostalgia. I first stepped through Cartagena's historic walls as a 16-year-old armed with a copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Gabo's famous novel about the love between his own parents. I was immediately enchanted as Gabo's magical world came to life.

I marvelled at the candied colours of the colonial buildings, their balconies overflowing with bougainvillea, and lost myself in the labyrinth of its side streets, walking behind the swaying hips of the city's palenqueras, the graceful women who pedal exotic fruit from enormous bowls balanced atop their heads. The days were whiled away retracing Gabo's steps through the Portal de los Dulces, the bustling sweet-sellers' arcade a stone's throw from

the harbour where the writer said he "smelt out the sentences" for his novel, searching for the places where "the characters themselves had lived, location hunting as if it was a film". I found the balcony where Florentino Ariza glimpsed Fermina Daza, his heart burning with unfulfilled passion, and sniffed the air for the scent of bitter almonds that reminded Dr Juvenal Urbino of "the fate of unrequited love".

Meanwhile, the nights were thronged with music. Dinner at La Vitrola to the accompaniment of a legendary salsa trio was followed by an impromptu performance by cumbia dancers, elegant in their voluminous white skirts. A talented musician and dancer himself, Gabo infused these rhythms into his novels and he would often say that they were in his DNA. "This whole literature thing is just a hobby," he jokingly confided to the Queen of Sweden at the Nobel Prize ceremony. "In fact, what I really am is a master of cumbia."

These early impressions were my real-world entry point into the fantastical, fictional realms of Gabo's imagination – a gateway that would lead me over the years beyond Cartagena into more remote pockets of the country where folklore, legend and fact mingle and merge, and carnivalesque characters inhabit the tropical towns and mountainsides.

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COLOMBIA



ARACATACA

Gabo's brilliant journalistic works, notably *News of a Kidnapping*, opened my eyes to the horrors that Colombia had lived through, and for a decade its brutal 60-year civil war became the subject of my films. As Colombia moved towards the signing of a peace deal with the guerrillas in 2015 – one year after Gabo's death – I returned to the country to take part in a commemorative talk alongside the Booker-nominated Colombian author Juan Gabriel Vásquez. A three-hour car journey from Cartagena across mangroves and dusty roads, Aracataca was Gabo's home town and the inspiration for the mythical village of Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and his lesser-known debut *Leaf Storm*. As the former recounts, "Macondo was a village of 20 adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs."

This 1967 novel tells the story of the village through the life of a single family, the Buendías, exploring how the combined forces of love, sex and passion fail to prevent the ultimate destruction of the world. It also presents a way of seeing in which the supernatural, legends and superstitions are part of the everyday

– a style of writing that became known as magical realism and which is now synonymous with Gabo's work. The sleepy town of Aracataca is where diehard Gabo fans come to visit the replica of the house the young author shared with his grandparents, now an open museum.

I wander into the gardens, where I've been told that after the April rains hundreds of yellow butterflies flutter through the air like ticker tape, similar to the swarms that follow the doomed romantic Mauricio Babilonia. Inside I pass the effigies of saints with shiny glass eyes that terrorised a young Márquez and the other children in the Buendía household.

A ladies-only parlour was another breeding ground for fantastic tales. "It was a strange life for me," Gabo remarked in an interview. "All the women, presided over by my grandmother, lived in a supernatural world – a fantastical world where everything was possible, where the greatest wonders were simply ordinary. But my grandfather was probably the most real person I have ever known, with his stories of the Civil War and politics. So I lived in these two divided worlds." ➤ ➤

COLOMBIA



COLOMBIA



COLOMBIA



SIERRA NEVADA AND BARRANQUILLA

Some 60km from Aracataca, Gabo's grandmother's world of superstition collides with the stark reality of a great injustice told to him by his grandfather. Waves of leafy green banana plantations roll into the horizon against the backdrop of the Sierra Nevada mountains, an area once commanded by America's United Fruit Company. In 1928, a year after Gabo's birth, a workers' strike resulted in the bloody Banana Massacre and up to 3,000 people were killed, an episode depicted in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In 2018 a right-wing congresswoman sparked heated debate when she questioned whether the massacre had ever happened, calling it a mere "myth of the communist narrative". However, by writing about the event in his most celebrated novel, Gabo set it firmly in Colombia's collective memory.

Following my return to Cartagena for the 2019 Hay Festival, I decide to adventure into the lush Sierra in search of the indigenous tribes echoed in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, such as the knowing Melquíades and his band of gypsies. I find the perfect jungle haven at Reserva One Love, seven thatched cabañas with plunge pools and hammocks set amid landscaped copses of palms, hibiscus, papyrus and heliconias. The owner, Allan Kassin, gives me a history lesson on the Kogi, Arhuaco, Kankuamo and Wiwa people who inhabited these mountains 1,000 years before the Spanish came.

I wake to a symphony of birdsong before meandering to the communal longhouse to enjoy a breakfast of arepa (fried cornflour bun) with eggs, velvety coffee and fresh papaya. I walk

through the mountains past barefoot Kogi children dressed in the white linen smocks worn by all the indigenous people in the Sierra, taking in the impressive birdlife, howler monkeys and towering macondo trees. Back at the ranch Allan and his team whip up meals of homemade falafel, creamy beetroot hummus and pork belly.

As night falls and the skies above us fill with stars, I share stories about Gabo with my fellow guests, roasting marshmallows and drinking hot chocolate around the campfire. Allan remarks that the wisdom of the gypsies that taught the family about the world in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* means it is "almost an ironic remake of those Renaissance chronicles of exploration and discovery bringing wisdom to the natives". In the book, just like in the Sierra, things are reversed: "It is us who can learn from the indigenous people who believe the Sierra Nevada to be the heart of the world."

The Carnaval de Barranquilla, a four-day festival that gives Rio a run for its money, is a raucous counterpoint to the stillness of the mountains. The parties here inspired Gabo's fictitious Macondo Carnival, in which Remedios the Beauty is declared Queen. Gabo spent time partying in this bustling sea port in the early 1950s as a young journalist and it's also where he met with like-minded intellectuals Alfonso Fuenmayor, Álvaro Cepeda Samudio and Alejandro Obregón at La Cueva, forging a formidable gang of artists, musicians and fellow writers who would shape contemporary culture in Colombia.

COLOMBIA





COLOMBIA



SANTA CRUZ DE MOMPOX

"Mompox does not exist. Sometimes we dream about her, but she does not exist." So says the hero of Gabo's *General* in his *Labyrinth*, a fictional retelling of Simón Bolívar's last journey. Located on the side of an island in the middle of the Magdalena River, the Unesco World Heritage Site of Mompox was an important trade centre in colonial times thanks to the navigability of the river and its remoteness from the Caribbean Sea, which placed it beyond the reach of pirate attacks. After enjoying centuries as a boom town, the Mompox bonanza came to a grinding halt at the start of the 20th century when erosion and sedimentation changed the river's course. As major traffic was redirected, it became increasingly isolated and forgotten – "a place straight out of a Gabo novel", as my friend Richard McColl, the co-author of the book *Was Gabo an Irishman?*, says.

I trundle into town past one-storey, Andalusian, whitewashed houses, shady colonial plazas and statues dedicated to Bolívar before arriving at Richard's converted colonial house, La Concepción, available to rent for guests of his landmark hotel La Casa Amarilla. There is something intensely romantic about Mompox – a beauty in the decaying fabric of its brightly coloured 16th- and 17th-century buildings. It moves at a much slower, horse-and-cart pace than Cartagena with its tourists and hawkers. It's a place for idle wandering and encounters with ice-cream sellers that reminds me of *One Hundred Years* and those

most brilliant of opening lines: "Many years later as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." Mompox is full of Márquez-like characters such as Luis Alfonso Soriano, travelling from village to village astride his trusty steed known as the "biblioburro" (donkey library) to share his books with the children of the region.

After a walk along a path hugging the river we sit in the shade sipping cool guava juice, watching young boys in the ceiba trees above let out squeals as they jump into the river to the hoots of howler monkeys and kingfishers. This was the river along which Gabo would travel in a steamer on a fortnight-long party, dancing, singing and drinking all the way to the university in Bogotá.

Everyone in Mompox has some chismes (gossip) they wish to impart. A man approaches, tapping his head and shooting me a conspiratorial glance – the local shaman, it transpires, en route to deliver medicine to a follicly challenged guest at Richard's hotel. We pop into the Iglesia de San Agustín, where a black Christ presides. When the flood waters rose to their highest levels in 2010 and threatened to reclaim the town, they took Christ down and bathed him in the river. The waters receded. "In these small towns you pray in the church by day and pay the fortune teller by night," Richard laughs.

COLOMBIA





COLOMBIA



We head to a shady lunch spot on the river, the Comedor Costeño. A man walks past with ripped clothes and bare feet. Richard raises his hand and shoots him a tender smile. I presume he's a local beggar but am corrected: "That's Julio César. He was struck by lightning a few years ago and went quite mad. He has a family and home but chooses to live on the streets." As I munch on freshwater fish I imagine the colour of this busy port of old: the cockfights, drinking, gambling, contraband, whores and slaves, the elaborate galleons arriving from and departing for Spain. During the Spanish conquest one-fifth of all the gold collected in the Americas passed through Mompox en route to the Spanish Crown. The gold drew metal and silversmiths from the Iberian Peninsula who brought with them knowledge of techniques introduced by Arabs centuries earlier – even today you can hear the tapping of artists' hammers creating exquisite filigree jewellery.

At nightfall the city comes to life as the heat of the day dissipates and the river dwellers reappear on their porches, rocking on their chairs. I pass a bench where Julio is sleeping peacefully.

"It always amuses me," Gabo once told an interviewer, "that the biggest praise for my work comes for its imagination, while the truth is that there's not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality." After years following in his footsteps, I can testify that the reality does indeed resemble the wildest imagination. Colombia es realismo mágico. >>

THE LOWDOWN

This Is Colombia Travel creates bespoke journeys through Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo (Colombia). A seven-day trip with exclusive guides, VIP access to the Hay Festival and luxury accommodation costs from £3,750 per person

ticolombiatravel.com

To view Kate Horne's film about Gabriel García Márquez visit kate-horne.com/portfolio/gabo/

A MINI GUIDE TO CARTAGENA

STAY

CASA SAN AGUSTIN

CALLE DE LA UNIVERSIDAD 36-44

hotelcasasanagustin.com

Rooms from £360

The historic frescoes and old-world furnishings of this bijou hotel make it the perfect place for romance. Sun yourself by the pool – a 300-year-old aqueduct – in the palm tree-filled courtyard by day before savouring ceviche de coco and delectable cocktails at the bar when night falls.

TOWNHOUSE CARTAGENA

CALLE SEGUNDA DE BADILLO 36-88

townhousecartagena.com

Rooms from £150

After the sun slips into the Caribbean Sea, head to the rooftop of this contemporary hotel to sip on award-winning cocktails (there's also a view of Fermina Daza's house from here). The creation of the founders of the nearby Blue Apple Beach Club, expect an unpretentious and playful vibe.

LAS ISLAS

BARU, CIÉNAGA DE CHOLÓN

lasislas.com.co

Rooms from £425

Located 45 minutes outside of the city centre, these magical tree houses are the perfect spot for quiet contemplation and penning your thoughts. Kayak, scuba dive or snorkel with tiny fish during the balmy days before settling down for sunset drinks overlooking the island.



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EAT

LA VITROLA

CALLE BALOCO 02-01

+57 5 664 8243

La Vitrola serves up an intoxicating mix of live Cuban music as well as a mean mojito, ropa vieja and camarones. It's a Cartagena institution where Gabo regularly dined with his family, and world leaders and Mick Jagger rubbed shoulders with locals.

DONJUÁN

CALLE DEL COLEGIO 34-60

donjuancartagena.com

If the Basque-influenced culinary delights of Donjuán are good enough for the president of Colombia, they're good enough for us. Don't leave without trying the grilled octopus, crayfish and lobster risotto and chocolate mousse.

CELELE BY PROYECTO CARIBE

CALLE DEL ESPÍRITU SANTO 29-200

ticartagena.com/celele

The new restaurant in town and the talk of Hay 2019. Chefs Jaime Camacho and Sebastián Giraldo find inspiration for their cutting-edge tasting menu on regular road trips along the Colombian coastline.



SHOP

ST DOM

CALLE SANTO DOMINGO 33-70
stdom.co

This beautifully curated concept shop is housed in a 300-year-old Spanish colonial house and centred around a lush tropical garden. Cartagena's answer to Colette, pick up local treasures such as bags by Mola Sasa or a Johanna Ortiz jumpsuit that is made for salsa.

CASA CHIQUI

CALLE DE LA UNIVERSIDAD NO. 36-127
casachiqui.com

This souk-like store is owned by the fashionable Chiqui de Echavarría, aka the tropical Daphne Guinness, who stocks a huge range of fun, beachy products from all over the world.

SILVIA TCHERASSI

CARRERA 3 N° 31-11, PLAZA SANTA TERESA
silviatcherassi.com/store/cartagena

The flagship store of this original Colombian purveyor of ruffled, feminine frocks. The talented designer Silvia Tcherassi is a true costeña hailing from Barranquilla and has designed a whole collection based on Gabo's work.

DRINK + DANCE

QUIEBRA CANTO

CAMELLON DE LOS MARTIRES 25-110
quiebracanto.com

Going strong since 1979, this is the ideal spot to dance into the small hours while sipping on potent aguardiente. Let the great local salsa dancers teach you some moves or just take a seat and watch the best party in town unfold.

CAFÉ HAVANA

CALLE DEL COLEGIO 34-60
+57 314 556 3905

Since Café Havana opened its doors in the once-unfashionable Getsemani district in 2006 it has transformed perceptions of the area, luring an international crowd off the beaten track to dance to a live salsa band and down seriously punchy mojitos.

ALQUIMICO

CALLE DEL COLEGIO 34-24
alquimico.com

Serving up a beguiling mix of sensory delights in a beautiful old shoe store, Alquimico brings some serious style to Cartagena's burgeoning nightlife scene. The decadent design and vibe are straight out of the pages of a Fitzgerald novel.



CASA SAN AGUSTIN

CALLE DE LA UNIVERSIDAD 36-44

hotelcasasanagustin.com

Rooms from £360

The historic frescoes and old-world furnishings of this bijou hotel make it the perfect place for romance. Sun yourself by the pool – a 300-year-old aqueduct – in the palm tree-filled courtyard by day before savouring ceviche de coco and delectable cocktails at the bar when night falls.

