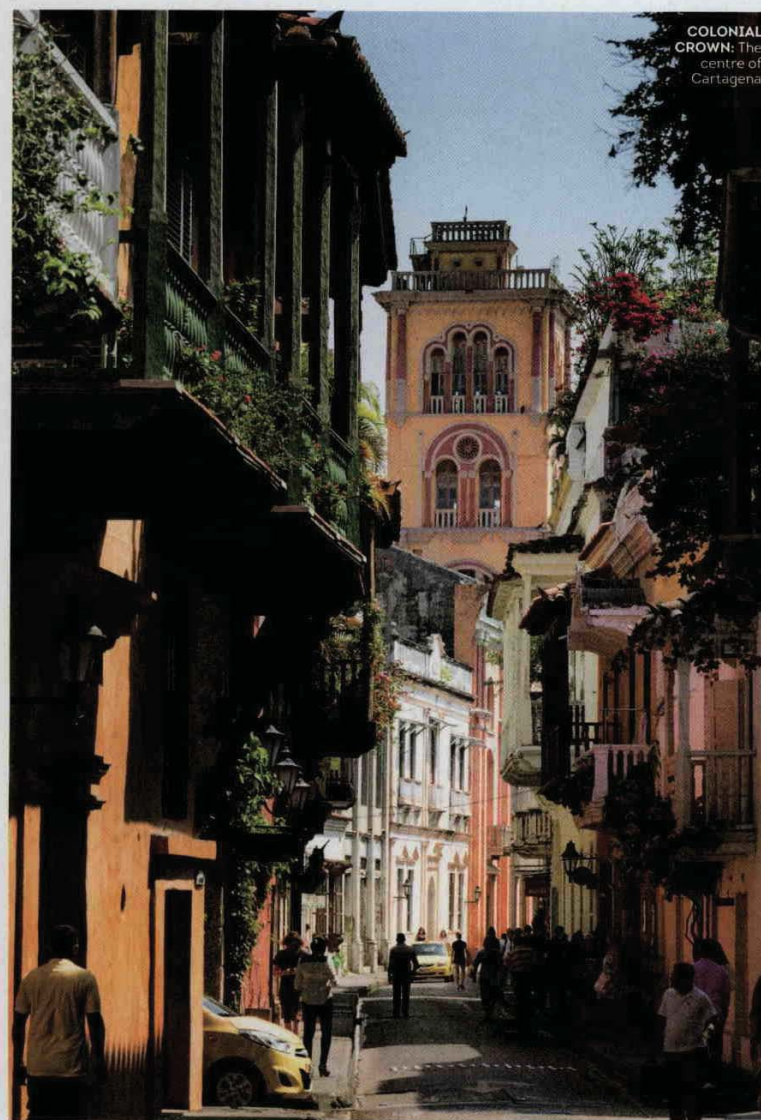


Eat your heart out

If you think you know the best countries for food, think again. Colombia is bound to surprise you

Words and photography **Jurriaan Teulings**



Jaime Rodriguez is serious about food. You only need to look at his tattoos to know that. His arms are filled with inked plates, pans and cooking utensils as well as a cartoonish quartet of fish, cattle and fowl.

The images on the backs of his hands, however, require a bit of interpretation. On the left, an elaborate drawing depicts a bunch of corozo, which he explains are the olive-sized fruits of a local palm tree. The gnarled tuber on his other hand — identified as a cubio — is the staple food from his native state of Boyacá.

He can only be a chef, and one with pride in the diversity of Colombian food, much of which remains unknown to the rest of the world. I met Jaime and his partner Sebastián Pinzón for the first time in 2017 at their pop-up restaurant in the heart of Cartagena de Indias.

Today, this sun-kissed city, beautifully set on a connected group of islands just off Colombia's Caribbean coast, is home to about a million people. In colonial times, it was one of the wealthiest ports in the Caribbean, and that still shows.

The rich merchants and aristocrats who lived here invested in lavish villas, churches and convents that have survived relatively unscathed, protected by the towering fortress of Castillo San Felipe de Barajas.

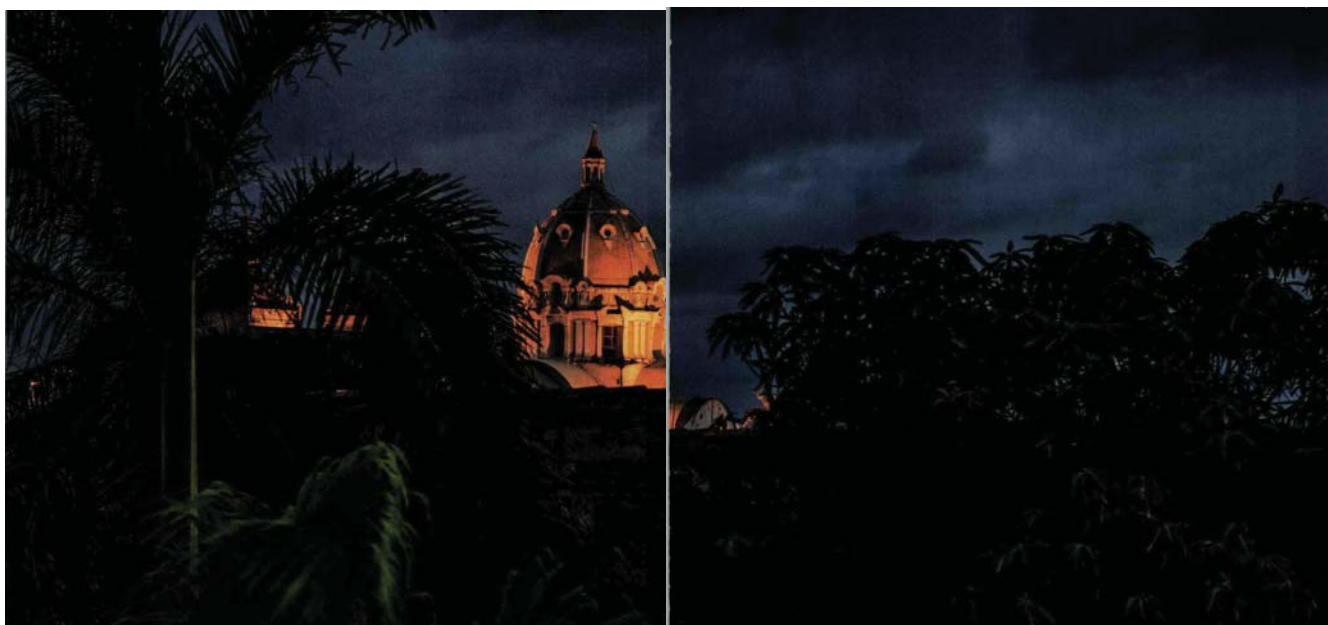
After decades of turmoil — political conflict and the infamous drug wars — Colombia is back on the tourist circuit.

Much of the boom is focused on Cartagena. The city might have lost much of its importance since the 19th century, but it never lost its beauty.

Snugly wrapped in picturesque colonial walls, a fairytale maze of cobbled alleys is lined with fabulous colonial architecture, awash with bougainvillea. The only traffic jams are lines of horses and carriages.

Colonial mansions have been snapped up one by one and turned into boutique hotels: Casa Pestagua is the former palatial residence of an 18th century count, while Casa San

Source: Attitude Magazine {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Sunday 1, December 2019
Page: 76,77,78,7
Area: 2945 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50000 Monthly
Ad data: page rate £3,200.00, scc rate £35.00
Phone: 0207 608 6300
Keyword: Casa San Agustin



GREEN SHOOTS: Iglesia de San Pedro Claver in Cartagena

Source: Attitude Magazine {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Sunday 1, December 2019
Page: 76,77,78,7
Area: 2945 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50000 Monthly
Ad data: page rate £3,200.00, scc rate £35.00
Phone: 0207 608 6300
Keyword: Casa San Agustin



Agustin is a series of three interconnected 17th-century homes, their palm-shaded courtyards filled with intimate restaurants and swimming pools.

With the rise of high-end hospitality, gastronomy soon followed, which brought the couple back home. After a stint at the Michelin-starred Akellare in San Sebastian, Spain, Jaime was appointed head chef at El Gobernador, a new restaurant in the courtyard of the Bastion Luxury Hotel.

Sebastián earned his credentials at Gustu, the restaurant venture by Danish chef Claus Meyer in the Bolivian city of La Paz. Returning to his home land around the same time as Jaime, he was appointed executive chef at Agua de Mar, one of the best fish restaurants in Cartagena, and close to El Gobernador.

Shortly after the two met, first through Facebook, then at a party, they fell in love. Six months later, both quit their jobs to work on their joint passion: to investigate a different, undiscovered part of their country's gastronomic culture — one with Syrian-Lebanese, African, European and indigenous influences. They called it Proyecto Caribe Lab.

My fellow guests at the pop-up restaurant are mostly members of Cartagena's high society, and don't strike me as an easy crowd to please. But each of the seven courses served are carefully styled. Corozo-berries — like Jamie's tattoos — appear in a chilled, tangy broth mixed with unripe coconut, poured over a bowl of slow-cooked lobster and fleshy succulent purslane leaves.

The coctel de camarón, a typical item on the menu of the simplest of beach-side restaurants in the area, is re-imagined as a thin wafer of dried baby shrimp, served on a smooth chunk of white coral.

The chefs explain that it's inspired by the preservation techniques of indigenous tribes they encountered on a road trip to the arid plains near the Venezuelan border.

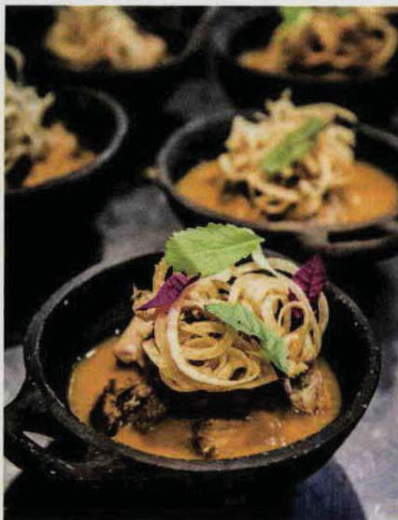
When one of the guests, an elderly lady in a sequinned red dress, announces that the taste of the unfamiliar fruit on her plate sparked

forgotten memories of her childhood, the chefs are delighted. Even more so, when she promises to bring them her mother's old recipe book.

This city cherishes its legends. Ask anyone to name the greatest Colombian who ever lived, they'll tell you it's the Nobel-prize winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez — affectionally known here as Gabo.

He captured every-day life on the streets of Cartagena and infused it with magic. His references to the city's many fried delights alone are enough for a four-hour food tour: arepas de huevo (twice-fried cornbread, stuffed with an egg), carimañolas (fritters stuffed with cheese, seasoned ground meat or shredded chicken) and bollos de maíz (steamed corn buns), sliced and skewered with pieces of queso costeño, a fresh and salty cheese.

"The courtyard of the women's prison has been turned into a restaurant"



A popular stall next to the clock gate sells fresh patacones, twice-fried green plantains, served with cheese or sour cream.

It's fair to say ambitions for Cartagena are sky-high. Even the women's prison is in on the action. As part of a social reintegration programme conceived by Colombian actor Johana Bahamon, the inmates have received training and recipes from top chefs from all over Colombia.

The prison's inner courtyard has been brightened up with floral murals and turned into a restaurant, aptly named Interno. The quality of the menu, ranging from ceviche and classic posta Cartagenera (slow-cooked beef with a cinnamon and cane sugar sauce) with coconut rice, is surprisingly high.

The atmosphere is friendly and relaxed, although admittedly it's hard to shake the rather strange feeling that your friendly waitress might well be a murderer.

Just outside the building that housed the Proyecto Caribe pop-up restaurant stretches Portal de Los Dulces, a walkway where candy sellers hawk bright concoctions of dried fruit and cane sugar from glass jars. Around the corner, the gaudy dresses of the fruit-selling palenqueras are a victory of centuries-old folklore over fashion. These palenqueras, named after the village of San Basilio de Palenque in the hills south west of Cartagena, have a story to tell that is as fascinating and Colombian as any Gabo novel.

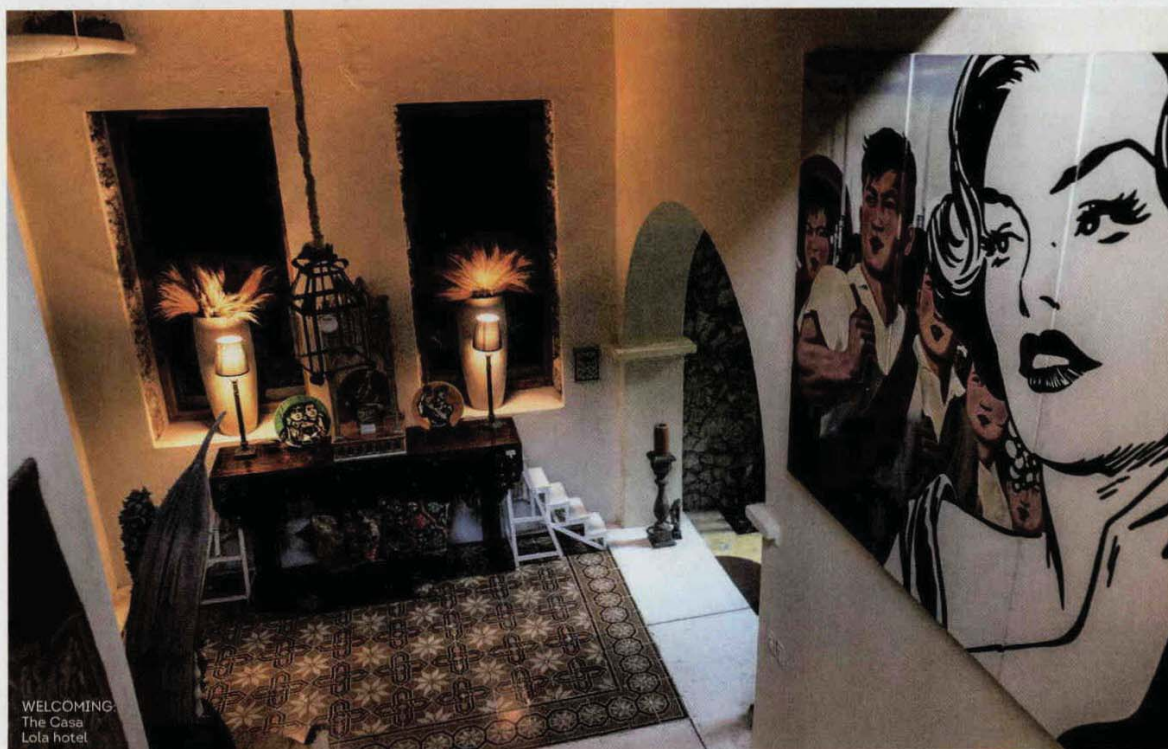
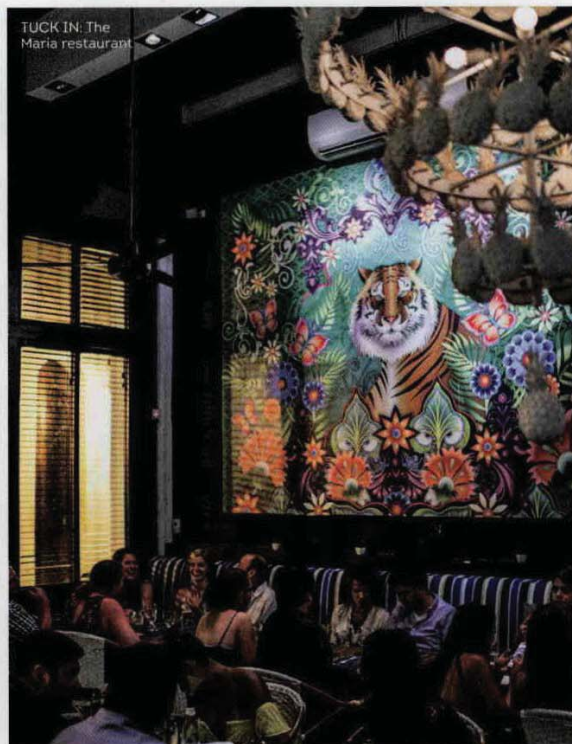
They are the direct descendants of a group of escaped slaves, who in the early 17th century took refuge in the hills outside Cartagena and proceeded to attack incoming slave ships. Their resistance was so successful that the Spanish crown, desperate to stop them, issued a royal decree guaranteeing their freedom, thus making them the first freed slaves in the Americas.

That freedom helped preserve a unique culture, language and cuisine, although most of the traditions weren't documented until a few years ago.

Despite a lot of the recipes being quite

>

Source: Attitude Magazine {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Sunday 1, December 2019
Page: 76,77,78,7
Area: 2945 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50000 Monthly
Ad data: page rate £3,200.00, scc rate £35.00
Phone: 0207 608 6300
Keyword: Casa San Agustin



similar to what's already available in traditional costeño restaurants in the city. I decide to visit Palenque to experience the real deal: a home-cooked lunch of cabezas de gato, a typical dish of golf-ball-sized scoops of mashed plantain mixed with onion and garlic, and sancocho, a stew of plantain and yucca, followed by a creole chicken dish served with patacones and coconut rice.

An unsmiling man named Florentino is presented as the creator of my dessert — a glutinous cake of yucca called enyucado. He is not just an excellent pastry chef, but also the town healer, and explains that the contents of the bottle — seven different herbs, mixed with rum — prevents fever and hangovers.

It can also ease burns and make you invisible to thieves, I'm informed!

Inspired by Jaime and Sebastian's research trips, I continue on a bit of a gastronomic adventure. Further inland, on the banks of the Magdalena river, I spend a few days in a dusty village called Santa Cruz de Mompox.

It is all decaying façades and brightly coloured churches, the kind of place Cartagena must have been like before it was polished and buffed and made into the tourist attraction it is today.

A power outage in the middle of the day goes largely unnoticed, the red roofs are not just the domain of slow cats and fast birds but also the occasional howler monkey using the power lines strung over the streets as hanging bridges.

The most popular piece of furniture is a rocking chair, often placed at the front door with a view of the street.

The heat of the afternoon is stifling, all I can do is sit and watch life flow by from a restaurant on the riverbank.

Nearby, under a giant strangler fig, a man barbecues catfish. I try some. It's OK, but my belly is still full of the local delicacies from the hawkers I met on the way across town. Some carried small boxes with tiny pork and beef sausages, sprinkled with fresh lime juice.

Others offered a mozzarella-like cheese filled with sweet guava jam, a local specialty.

The route to my next destination, Santa Marta, cuts through the Zona Bananera, an oceanic stretch of banana plantations.

Much of the labour here is fuelled with peto, a thick sweet drink made of milk, cinnamon, cheese and wood-roasted white corn that gives it a pleasant smoky flavour and is sold by the side of the road.

The culture of the region still largely revolves around the banana trade. Santa Marta's football team is nicknamed The Banana Cyclone, and the city is known for its cayeye, a breakfast of green bananas boiled in salty water, mixed with cheese and a sauce of tomatoes, onions and cumin. The dish isn't the prettiest but I find it quite tasty.

Boiled green banana, it turns out, is not unlike potato. The best-looking cayeye is

served at Don Pepe, a boutique hotel a few blocks from the beach in the former home of an influential banana trader who turns out to be the uncle of Colombian singing superstar Carlos Vives. Part of his music video for *La Bicicleta*, a duet with Shakira, was shot at the hotel. The main character in the video, a bicycle, is parked next to the pool.

My trip ends here, but 2½ years after I first meet Jaime and Sebastián, I manage to return to Cartagena. Proyecto Caribe Lab has spawned a restaurant, Celele, located in the Getsemani neighbourhood on the more bohemian side of Cartagena's colonial centre. It has only been open a few months but is already a steady fixture in the local dining scene. I'm not surprised to find that the couple are now local celebrities, and winning international awards means their fame is quickly spreading across the border.

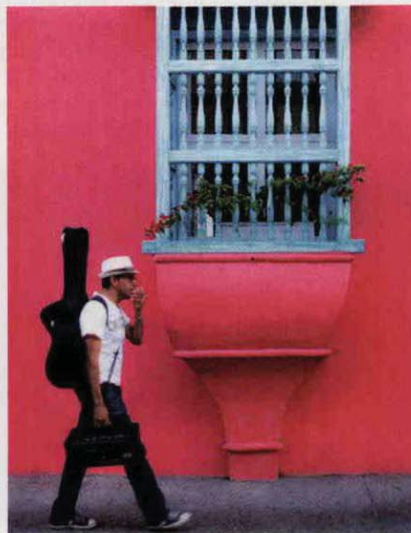
Celele is decorated with the work of local artisans who also produced much of the crockery and furniture. In the back, away from the air conditioning, is a cocktail bar under a large mural that shows the geography and traits of Caribbean people.

Three coloured artworks on the wall represent the areas that inspire the menu: blue for Caribbean Sea, dark yellow for the desert of La Guajira, green for the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountain range and the Montes de María, the hills that are Cartagena's hinterland.

The food is spectacular. My new favourite is a goat stew, cooked in coconut milk with dried shrimp rice, inspired by the indigenous communities that live in the La Guajira, a desert region near the Venezuelan border where sand dunes tumble into the sea.

It's definitely unusual and if you had asked me before if a with goat/shrimp combo would ever make it into my favourite list, I would probably have told you to stop asking ridiculous questions. Now, I'll feel I should plan a new road trip that includes La Guajira, the one place still lacking in my explorations of Caribbean Colombia. 📍

"The contents are said to prevent fevers and make you invisible to thieves"



Cartagena catalogue

Hotels

Casa San Agustin

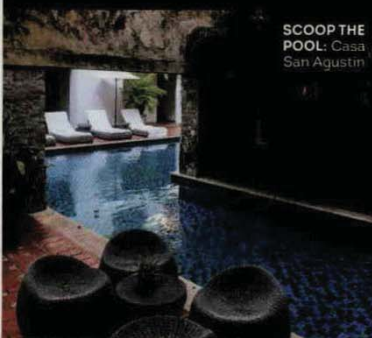
The most fabulous lodging in town comprises no less than three 17th-century mansions decorated with local antiques. Two courtyards are connected to accommodate an L-shaped pool, while a third serves as the outdoor seating area of Alma, a gourmet restaurant with live music and a fashionable cocktail bar. Try the ceviche marinated in Kola Roman, a popular local soft drink.

hotelcasasanagustin.com

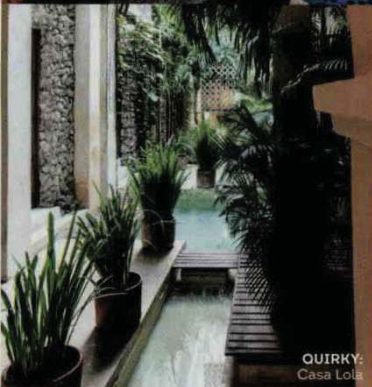
Casa Lola

Spanish interior architect Ignacio Garcia de Vinuesa has decorated his Casa Lola with antiques and art from around the world. The 10 spacious rooms are all different but each is infused with a quirky sense of fun. The best thing about this boutique hotel is its multi-level roof terrace with three pools. Located in the Getsemani neighbourhood near Celele.

casalola.com



SCOOP THE POOL: Casa San Agustin



QUIRKY: Casa Lola



COCKTAILS: El Baron

Bars and restaurants

El Baron

Located in a tiny space on the corner of the lovely Plaza de San Pedro Claver, this is the place for the best cocktails in town. Order the gin basil smash.

elbaron.co

Cafe del Sur

Found at 25-60 Calle San Juan, a quiet street in Getsemani, this is where coffee savant David Arzayus brews only the purest and the most unusual coffee concoctions.

Celele

Highly innovative New Caribbean cuisine, run by two of Colombia's rising stars. The focus is on food and traditions from the country's Caribbean coast, served with the kind of creative expertise one can expect from young chefs trained in some of the world's most prestigious kitchens.

celelerestaurant.com

Maria

Modern Colombian cuisine enriched with international touches from chef Alejandro Ramirez, who worked in the best kitchens of New York, Tokyo, London and Mexico City.

mariacartagena.com

El Gobernador

Easily the most elegant restaurant in town. Opt for the ceviche of lionfish: an invasive species that the region is trying to get rid of -hence not just delicious, but also guilt-free.

bastionluxuryhotel.com

Elsewhere in Colombia

Medellin: Hush Hush Dinners

Chef Juan David Moreno prepares special private dinners in the fabulous homes of Colombia's elite. The locations can vary according to the preferences of his guests, but usually there is a focus on architecture or art. While Juan prepares dinner, Marta guides her guests through her extensive collection of contemporary art from up-and-coming Colombian artists. For more information and bookings, call Claudia Espinal of Muvon Travel on +57-314 697-8356



MADE TO ORDER: Hush Hush Dinners

Leo

Colombian celebrity chef Leonor Espinosa's flagship restaurant in Bogota offers journeys through indigenous ingredients and gastronomic traditions that even most Colombians would rarely have been exposed to. Her current menu, called Ciclo-Bioma, explores the ways new species can be used in the kitchen. Think alligator and big-bottomed ants paired with curious drinks such as arrechón (an aphrodisiac) and a fantastic salty cocktail inspired by the Pacific Ocean.

restauranteleo.com

Barranquilla: Gay Carnival

For most of the year, the port city of Barranquilla doesn't have much going for it except a statue of the singer Shakira, who was born there. But during carnival, this is the place to be. Next year's dates are 22-25 February but make sure to arrive a week early for the huge gay carnival that takes place the Saturday before (15 February).