

Press Coverage 2019: Casa San Agustín

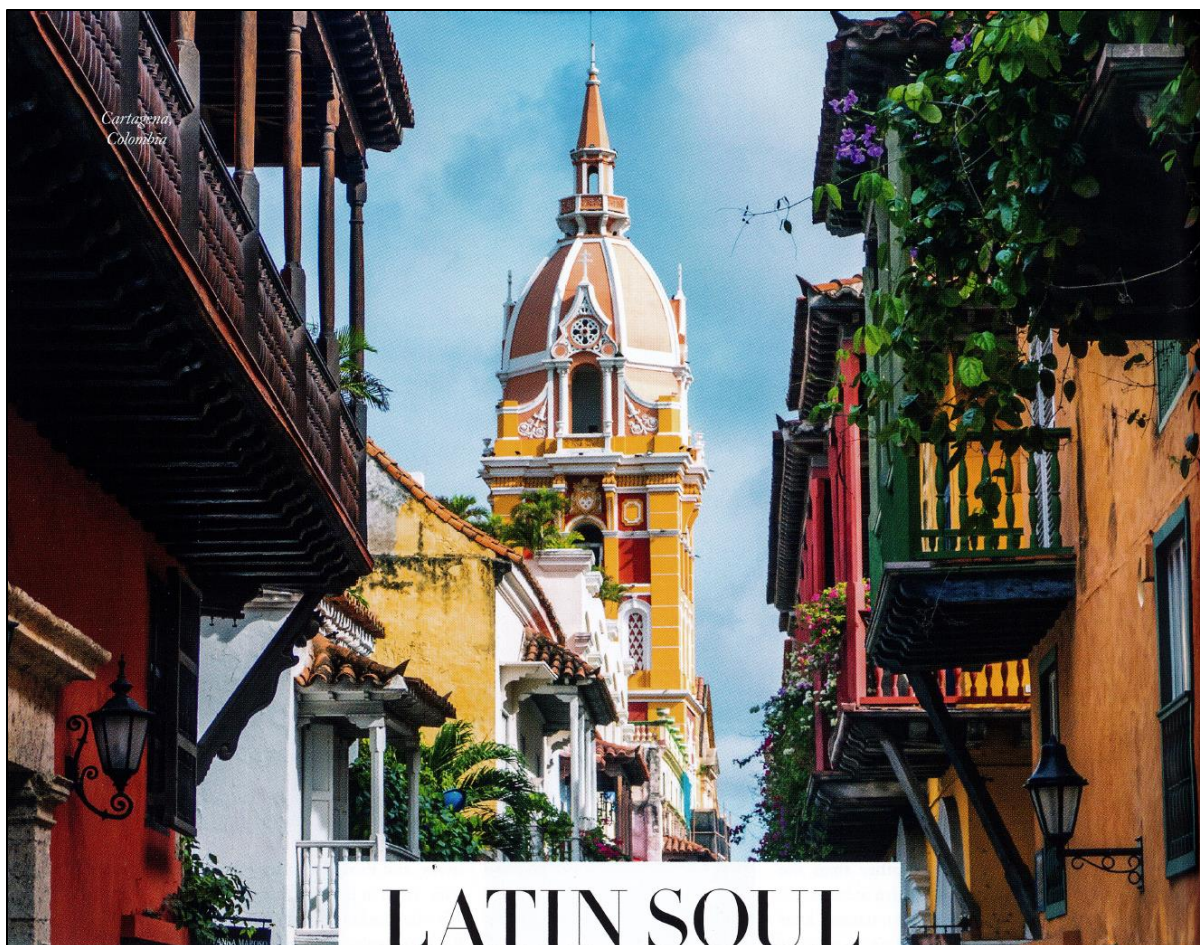
Date: November 2019

Publication: Harper's Bazaar

Circulation: 117,414

PRV (\$): 34,590





LATIN SOUL

Lucy Halfhead discovers local rhythms, delectable delicacies and a thriving arts scene on the streets of Colombia's most flourishing cities



Above: a mural in Bogotá. Right: a suite at Hotel Casa San Agustín



They say a picture is worth a thousand words. If so, Cartagena, the jewel in Colombia's crown and one of the most exquisite cities in Latin America, certainly has a lot to say. Founded in 1533 as a major port on the north coast of the country, its inner walled town, packed with churches, is a Unesco World Heritage site, while the hipster neighbourhood of Getsemaní has convincingly shaken off its reputation for drugs and crime, and is now a colourful menagerie of cafes, live-music venues and street art. Almost every lane is lined with vivid murals and paintings depicting scenes of Caribbean life, daubed on the crumbling stucco walls by renowned graffiti artists from across the world. And yet the pristine white-sand beaches of the Rosario Islands are just an hour's boat ride away from this urban vibrancy across the sparkling sea.

My friend and I were staying at the Hotel Casa San Agustín, a characterful boutique property fashioned out of a former nunnery, with an effortlessly chic interior-design scheme of creams and dark greens. Our two-bedroom suite had a flower-filled balcony overlooking the university, huge beds, and intricately painted bathroom tiles, offering a sense of charm and authenticity, but with all the mod cons, including super-powerful showers and strong WiFi. The service was sophisticated and the food outstanding – from

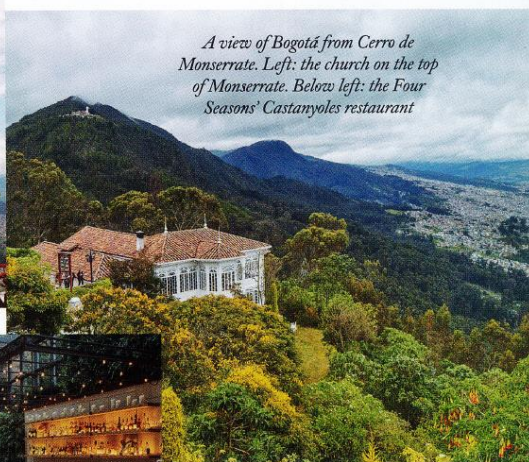
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egg-white omelettes and buttery pastries for breakfast to dinners of burgers and lobster empanadas in the courtyard restaurant, Alma – and I enjoyed an energising ‘jet-lag’ massage with ginger-infused oils at the spa.

Eager to explore Cartagena's Old Town, we commandeered a couple of the hotel bicycles to join the horse-drawn carts rattling down the cobbled streets past *palenqueras*, fruitsellers in colourful dresses, expertly balancing their wares on their heads. In the muggy heat it was necessary to make regular stops for iced citrus juice or fresh-mango popsicles, known as boli, from one of the kerbside vendors, before retreating to the hotel to read our books under the sail-like umbrellas by the pool, surrounded by soaring palm-trees. By night, the city cast a sensual spell, as salsa music poured out of every bar and restaurant, and friends gathered to share bottles of aguardiente, Colombia's liquorice-flavoured national drink, and to dance in the leafy plazas.

One thing's for sure, you'll never go hungry in Cartagena; but to sample the city's street food – a blend of African, Spanish and native South American flavours – it is wise to enlist the help of a guide. We were joined on a languorous stroll by a local chef, Maria Delgado, whose own restaurant, Caffè Lunático, is famous for its sharing plates of mango ceviche with coconut, and txistorra sausage with jalapeño. Over the course of three hours we tasted arepas – disks of corn, stuffed with beef and egg, then dropped into sizzling vats of oil – 1970s-style shrimp cocktail, loaded with mayo and tomato sauce, and crispy patacones, twice-fried green plantain soaked in garlic sauce. We stopped at El Portal de los Dulces, where you can get lost among the carts piled high with confectionery, and I had hands down the best coffee I've ever tasted at Café del Mural, whose alfresco bar was the perfect spot to sit and watch the world go by.

While our stomachs were satisfied, we still had an appetite to see more of this beguiling country, and so we boarded an 80-minute flight south to Bogotá. Perched 2,640 metres above sea level in the Andes Mountains, it is one of the highest capital cities in the world. The effects of this altitude can range from headaches to nausea, but we could only detect a shortness of breath when climbing stairs. Admittedly, there were delightful distractions at every turn; the rainbows curving across the sky as we strolled through the picturesque streets of the historic old town, La Candelaria; boisterous locals playing *tejo*, a game in which you throw metal pucks at a clay target containing gunpowder; and the embroidered slippers for sale



A view of Bogotá from Cerro de Monserrate. Left: the church on the top of Monserrate. Below left: the Four Seasons' Castanyoles restaurant



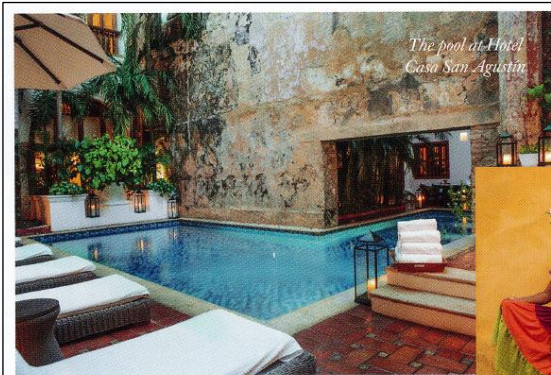
at the elegant Olga Piedrahita boutique. We reached even more dizzying heights by taking the cable-car up to the peak of Cerro

de Monserrate, where we were rewarded with panoramic views of Bogotá's urban sprawl.

Our sanctuary from the hustle and bustle and the ever-present threat of rain (due to Bogotá's close proximity to the clouds) was the Four Seasons Hotel Casa Medina. Nestled in a verdant neighbourhood full of restaurants and bars, the hotel was originally built as a private mansion and boasts original wood-panelling from the 1940s, grand fireplaces and stained-glass windows. The fabulous in-house bistro, Castanyoles, is set in a colonial courtyard with a glass roof; its seemingly never-ending breakfast buffet of freshly baked breads, fruit and cereals proved invaluable fuel for a day exploring Bogotá's thriving art scene with the gallerist Bonnie Lewis from Espacio KB, one of the coolest collectives in town.

We started at the Botero Museum, filled with curvaceous sculptures by the country's most famous living artist Fernando Botero, followed by the Museo del Oro, which contains an extraordinary 55,000-strong collection of gold artefacts, ceramics and tiles. In addition, Lewis was able to shine a light on the contemporary Colombian creatives who are dazzling the global market, including the sculptor Doris Salcedo, whose poignant installation *Fragments* was created using 37 tonnes of weapons turned over by guerrilla fighters after the 52-year war between the Colombian government and leftist Farc rebels. But perhaps the most fascinating part of our day was spent touring the San Felipe district, rich with more than 100 commercial showrooms preparing for the 15th edition of the International Art Fair of Bogotá, which has become the Art Basel of Latin America, drawing thousands of collectors and curators from around the world each year. It seemed the surest sign yet that Colombia's creative energy has re-emerged from the country's complicated history and looks set to blossom even further in the years to come. □

Hotel Casa San Agustín, from about £390 a room a night (www.hotelcasasanagustin.com). Four Seasons Hotel Casa Medina Bogotá, from £250 a room a night (www.fourseasons.com). Plan South America (020 7993 6930; www.plansouthamerica.com) can organise culture tours. Return flights with Avianca (www.avianca.com) cost from £860.



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