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HOTEL REVIEW *excerpted from the May 2014 issue*

Cartagena, Colombia: A Colonial Treasure Casa San Agustin

IN RECENT YEARS, COLOMBIA HAS RECEIVED INCREASINGLY FAVORABLE PUBLICITY. AT TIMES, IT HAS SOUNDED rather too good to be true, but the election of Alvaro Uribe in 2002 resulted in a measure of stability unknown for decades. I wanted to see for myself whether Colombia has indeed become a destination of interest to the sophisticated traveler.

Cartagena erased many doubts within a few hours of our arrival. Once, the Caribbean port served as the most important gateway to South America, as well as the storehouse for gold and precious stones on their way to Spain. The riches passing through required formidable defensive walls, and these surround the city to this day. Cartagena attained new stature in the 18th century when it became the most important city in the Viceroyalty of New Granada, a colony encompassing Colombia, Venezuela, Panama and Ecuador. Wealthy residents erected grand mansions centered on shady courtyards, many of which fell into disrepair after independence came in 1821. “The great old families sank into their ruined palaces in silence,” the late Gabriel García Márquez wrote in “Love in the Time of Cholera,” his famous novel set in turn-of-the-century Cartagena. “Along the rough cobbled streets ... weeds hung from the balconies and opened cracks in the whitewashed walls of even the best-kept mansions, and the only signs of life at two o’clock in the afternoon were languid piano exercises played in the dim light of siesta.”

Nowadays, Cartagena bursts with renewed vibrancy, and you’re far more likely to hear the infectious rhythms of salsa spilling into the street. Several universities draw youthful energy to the city, and cultural institutions host noteworthy events such as Cartagena’s first contemporary art biennale, held earlier this year with exhibitions throughout the historic center. I stumbled across a ruined palace or two, but most mansions have been restored and converted into atmospheric museums, restaurants, bars and hotels. Balconies on the brightly painted façades now sprout bougainvillea instead of weeds. The compact old quarter has been compared to Venice, but to me, it more closely resembles New Orleans. Both draw throngs of tourists but retain their identities as real cities, with music, shopping, art and restaurants of interest to locals as well as to visitors. The colorful historic center, built substantially from blocks of fossilized coral, has not yet been lost to souvenir shops and cruise-ship passengers. Even the new apartment buildings and resort hotels lining the beaches of Bocagrande have architectural integrity, forming an ensemble of gleaming white towers shimmering against the blue of the Caribbean.

However, Americans can find better beaches closer to home, and there is little incentive to stay outside the historic city walls. The most appealing of the colonial conversions is the 30-room **CASA SAN AGUSTIN**, comprising three whitewashed buildings trimmed with wooden balconies on a diminutive plaza across from the University of Cartagena, a former convent. A wrought-iron gate leads to the front desk and lobby lounge with



PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

terra-cotta tile floors, wrought-iron wall sconces and a wrought-iron chandelier hanging from the nearly 25-foot wood-beamed ceiling. Beyond lies the main courtyard, with a palm-shaded L-shaped swimming pool beneath a 17th-century wall. An adjacent pool bar with white daybeds and neutrally upholstered ottomans feels too formal for relaxing in a bathing suit, but two roof terraces with loungers offer both sunny and shady spaces in which to recline, along with views of the city’s ornate bell towers. A veritable labyrinth of halls and indoor/outdoor lounges laces the rest of the hotel. My favorite retreat was the tranquil air-conditioned library, where chic Spanish furnishings complement the whitewashed walls and partially exposed frescoes. As the sun set, innumerable candles began to glow from sconces, floor lanterns and candelabras.

Our Junior Suite came with a wood-beamed ceiling and limestone floors, and exhibited the same sophisticated taste as the rest of the property. A white love seat sat atop a sisal rug, and orchids adorned the wicker coffee table and mahogany writing desk, where a plate of petits fours had greeted us on arrival. White Moroccan-style nightstands flanked an iron-framed bed, and double-glazed glass doors leading to the balcony further ensured a good night’s sleep. Colorful Spanish-style tiles clad the walls of the bath, which came with dual marble-topped vanities.

Staff at the Casa San Agustin were reliably warm, obliging and English-speaking, and numerous commendable restaurants are just a short walk away. 🌿 93

“Cartagena’s compact old quarter draws throngs of tourists, but its music, shopping, art and restaurants remain of interest to locals as well as to visitors.

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