

PRIVAT
ESCAPE

PARADISE REGAINED

*The crime and guerrilla insurgents that once plagued Colombia's Caribbean coast have largely gone – but can this natural idyll now survive an influx of tourists?
Patrick Welch reports from Cartagena*

IT USED TO BE THAT IF YOU said you were headed to Colombia, you had to endure a barrage of jokes about kidnapping, drug trafficking and money laundering. But the jokes masked genuine concern. It was the last place your loved ones wanted to hear you were heading off to. How times have changed.

I'm floating in a rooftop pool overlooking the Caribbean on one side, and the spires and turrets of Cartagena's walled old town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, on the other. Black vultures waddle along the colonial-style terracotta roofs, palm trees sway and crackle in the breeze, and everywhere flowers are in bloom.

I'm staying at the Casa Pestagua, the ex-residence of the Count of Pestagua, an old republican house with 11 delicately restored rooms and a hushed, verdant courtyard pool hidden behind a huge, thick 16th-century wooden door. It's every bit the secret tropical hideaway for which Cartagena is famous. One of the owners, Claude Pimont, a French actor who has lived in Colombia since 1982, explains the city's appeal: 'It's the best preserved and biggest colonial city in Latin America. It has the great fortune of being on the

Caribbean coast, an area synonymous with sun, beaches and partying.'

Cartagena has always been popular with Colombian tourists but now, as street crime and the guerilla insurgency that plagued the country have dwindled, largely as a result of the hardline presidency of the wildly popular Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010), a new sense of security and optimism has led to a boom in foreign investment and foreign visitor numbers.

During my visit, the Clintons, the Blairs and the Spanish monarchy were among the guests at ex-president Andrés Pastrana's son's wedding in the Catedral de Santa Catalina de

Alejandría, one of the city's huge, resplendent churches, and one of the oldest in the Americas. That party was just one of four large, high-profile weddings that the whole town seemed to know were taking place that weekend. The city, it seems, is having a moment.

And not for the first time. Founded in 1533, Cartagena fast became one of the most important ports in the Americas – in came conquistadors and out went almost all the gold plundered from New Spain. The settlement became rich and beautiful. 'Where a normal city of this size might have four or five extravagant private houses, Cartagena, because of its wealth and importance, has around 40 houses of great architectural significance. It had a Spanish aristocratic class like nowhere else in the colony,' Claude tells me.

As the city's wealth grew, it became a target for pirates, too, including Sir Francis Drake, who in 1586 kindly agreed not to destroy it, on the condition the city paid him 10 million pesos, which he took back to England. The remnants of such scuffles can still be seen today. On a tour of the Alfiz Hotel, a 17th-century house that was once home to the British consul, co-owner Karl Sandrock shows me the cannon balls that were found during the refurbishment of its ground floor.

Unsurprisingly, it's an atmospheric place. Walking through the old town, I feel like I could be in a Gabriel García Márquez novel: bougainvillea rolls off colonial wooden balconies, while the streets teem with uniformed school kids and chirpy men selling tropical fruit juices from carts. García Márquez, or Gabo as he's known here, got his break working at the city's *El Universal* newspaper in 1948 and still owns a house here.

Eventually, though, I find my interest in colonial and republican history and architecture superseded by my interest in Caribbean beaches, and I decide it's time to move on to the town of Santa Marta and the Tayrona National Park.

There's something ironic about the fact that this historically significant strip, near where the Spanish first landed over 500 years ago, is still one of Latin America's most off-the-radar destinations. When Rodrigo de Bastidas arrived here in 1525 after sailing on Columbus's second voyage to the New World, he founded the oldest town in South America, Santa Marta. It was here, too, 300 years later, that Simón Bolívar, liberator of South American from the Spanish colonial yoke, uttered his last breath.

I'm headed an hour up the road to La Jorará, a family-run ecologically minded organic farm a hundred metres or so from

the beach which has been converted into a guesthouse. Owner Iván Duarte's father, a lawyer from Bogotá, bought the property in 1998 when the area was still largely off-limits to visitors because of local paramilitary and guerilla activity.

'When we arrived in this area, not even Colombians travelled around here,' Iván tells me. 'But then from 2000 to 2008, there was a big change and suddenly the Ruta del Sol, the coast road, opened up and the region became accessible.'

The area's biggest draw is the 12,000 hectare Tayrona National Park, one of South America's most picturesque spots: a nature reserve on the beach, with just one access road in and out. Iván takes me on a day-long hike through the park with a local tour guide, Enrique, to a pre-Hispanic village, Pueblito, which was once home to 4,000 people. As we walk through the jungle, we eat mandarins and caimito fruit

A bust of San Martín, one of South America's liberators, in Cartagena's historic district, which was built around the port

PREVIOUS PAGE: unspoilt Tayrona National Park.

HERE: cannon that once defended Cartagena against pirates take aim on the modern city

'Cartagena is the best preserved colonial city in Latin America with around 40 houses of architectural significance'



CORBIS, GETTY



Cartagena is an atmospheric place. Walking through the old town, I feel like I could be in a Gabriel García Márquez novel

– a sort of giant lychee native to the Colombian Caribbean – and see anteaters, black eagles, howler monkeys and a variety of frightening-looking spiders.

Finally, feeling a little like Indiana Jones, we arrive at Pueblito where I'm shown a cave that served as the local prison, the village's sacrificial rock and remarkably complex irrigation and intruder alarm systems. The views over the jungle and out to sea are spectacular; from here, Pueblito's people were some of the first inhabitants of South America to see Europeans arrive at the start of the 16th century, with their galleons, cannons and horses – none of which had ever been seen before by the natives.

Eventually we emerge onto the golden beach at Cabo San Juan and see one of a handful of campsites, which, along with a hotel offering a sophisticated version of local indigenous huts, comprise the park's accommodation options. I'm told that on a clear day, you can stand in the sea here and see all the way to the snowcapped mountains of Pico Colón and Pico Bolívar, the two highest mountains in Colombia, 42km inland.

The mountains are also home to the 'Lost City', another pre-Columbian ruin reached via a six-day trek into the mountains. The Lost City was home to the Tayrona people, a pre-Hispanic civilisation, after whom the park is named, and who still have a number of descendants living in the area, many of whom have retreated high into the mountains to try to maintain a traditional way of life. Everywhere on the coast, we pass Kogi and Arhuaco people in traditional white dress, which makes me wonder how this part of Colombia, still relatively untouched by visitors, might withstand an influx of tourists.

'We're facing changes and it's challenging,' Iván tells me. 'If tourism is to be one of the main sources of development here, we need to do it in a sustainable way, a way that improves

Cartagena offers modern luxury with colonial charm in hotels such as the Casa San Agustín





HERE AND BELOW:
Tayrona offers Caribbean
beaches and rainforest treks



people's lives. We don't want mass tourism, we want tourism that doesn't have a big impact on the destination. There's a culture here that makes the place unique. The Kogi, for example, have lived here for a thousand years and are still trying to retain their way of life.'

The challenge here will be balancing progress with preservation, not just of the environment but of the different communities that share the region. Iván is confident it can be done, pointing out that the country is far from losing any of its slightly loopy charm – this is, after all, the place nicknamed 'Locombia', the crazy country. 'The whole dogs and horses everywhere thing, the general way of doing things, it's still pretty authentic,' he laughs, before adding on a more serious note that 'infrastructure is still basic. Colombia is really still a baby in terms of tourism'.

Whatever the future holds for this baby, it has fantastic natural gifts in the historic charm and natural beauty of its Caribbean coast. ■■

*'We don't want mass tourism.
There's a culture here that
makes the place unique'*