

WHERE TO GO WHEN

TOP 10 HOLIDAY DESTINATIONS - JULY



School's out for summer - which means it's holiday time for anyone with children. (Those without kids might want to head off to the coast quick-smart, to be the first on the beach or by the pool.) Europe's holiday season is in full swing; beach clubs are rocking, seaside restaurants buzzing, and the weather is marvellously, steamily hot. Further afield, July is a great month in some of the world's most exciting, exotic locations from the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific.

7. Cartagena

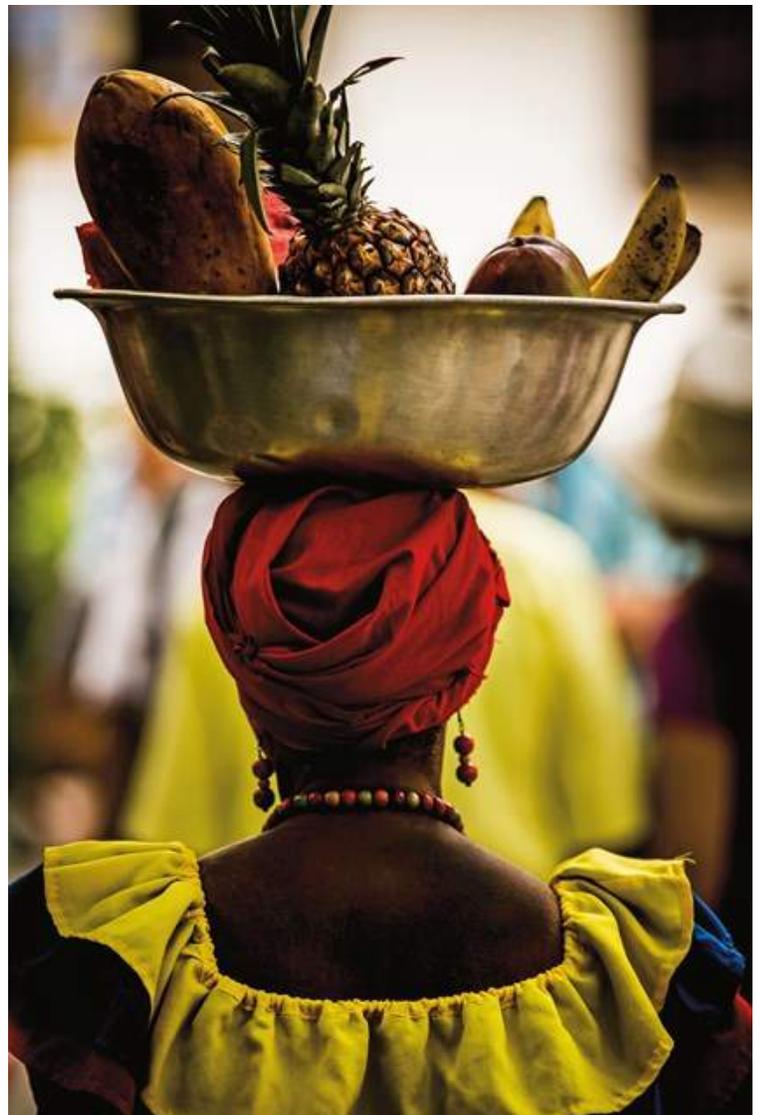
Increasingly a contender for the Caribbean's coolest city, Cartagena has a buzz about it right now, making it high on our wishlist for July, when the weather is great. A number of new hotels, bars and restaurants have popped up in the Colombian city with Colombian cooking now rivalling that of Peru in South American foodie circles. Spend lazy days exploring the pretty colonial architecture of the old town followed by hip-swinging evenings drinking and dancing long into the night.



Thanks to its buzzy bars and hotels, Colombia's Cartagena has a soul-shaking, body-rocking groove that now makes it the Caribbean's most alluring city

CARTAGENA DE INDIAS remains a 16th-century treasure of cobbled streets and pastel-coloured walls, of arcaded squares and elegant promenades on the Caribbean coast. In the old walled city - among the colonial villas and the sprawling monasteries - there is the haunting echo of gold at every turn. For centuries, the life of this city was one long raid on its own good fortune: the gold that flowed through it from across South America, a blessing and a curse.

Anyone who has read Gabriel García Márquez will be familiar with the atmosphere in Cartagena: the steamy coastal heat, the clip-clop of hooves, the crumbling mansions, the sweet sound of salsa snaking around street corners, the elaborate family histories, the secrets, the plots, the ghosts, and the unlikely twists of fate; the charm, the corruption, the sensuality and the sweaty tropical promise of misadventure and misalliance.



Credit: David Crookes

'Cartagena was like the woman everyone desired,' said Fernando Rivera, my friend and guide. 'She was rich beautiful, and wayward. The English, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, they all tried.' For visitors, this is Colombia's calling card, still the most beautiful Spanish colonial city in the Americas.



The pool at Casa San Agustin Credit: David Crookes

CASA SAN AGUSTIN

The top boutique hotel in the old walled city, this is also one of the newest (it opened in 2012). Three 18th-century houses have been knocked through to form one glorious space. It's worthy of its five-star rating: nothing is over-looked here, and the staff are tremendous. An L-shaped pool in the courtyard flows beneath the city's former aqueduct. Upstairs is a library with deep armchairs and an honesty bar. Rooms are big with iPads, canopied beds and marble-tiled bathrooms. The street-level Alma restaurant is excellent: eat while watching the horse-drawn carriages rattling past.

A bedroom at Casa San Agustin
Credit: David Crookes

As a country, this is South America's debutante, emerging from years of seclusion. For decades a civil war, handed down over generations from fathers to sons like an heirloom, kept travellers away. But the good news is the war is over. There are peace talks, and the country is newly confident about its future. Expatriates who went abroad in the bad years are eagerly returning home and Colombia is full of entrepreneurial energy.

Visitors are astonished by the diversity. There are Andean peaks and dry cowboy prairies, rolling green coffee country and two coasts, Caribbean and Pacific. There are rustic haciendas, remote tribes and cities throbbing with salsa. And there is Cartagena, already old when Captain Cook set off to find Australia.

WHERE TO STAY IN CARTAGENA

The city's architecture - all courtyards and arcades and balconies - mean that an intense and wonderful atmosphere is built in. All the best places to stay are several hundred years old, and the very best probably have pirates' bones bricked up in a wall somewhere.

