

VACATIONSTYLE



A long ago party spot for raucous pirates, the first South American settlement of the Spanish colonists, the mystical setting of many a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel, a vacation retreat for cartel drug lords - over the years, Cartagena de Indias, or Cartagena as it's known, has been a lot of different things to a lot of disparate people - and now it tops 2016 lists of chicest holidays. Colombians realized the beauty of their Caribbean coastal jewel when the beau monde (Yoko Ono, Greta Garbo, Mick Jagger) started sniffing around. Politicians, artists and expats began pouring love and cash into restoring its traditional dwellings (many now worth upwards of \$10M USD) and refurbishing its landmarks (the 1500s Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, the church of San Pedro Claver and the Adolfo Mejia Theatre among them), gaining the city UNESCO World Heritage Status in 1984. It went through a brief cooling when a 2001 US travel advisory to the country was issued, but warnings lifted, Cartagena is now Colombia's top tourist destination. This year, 300,000 foreigners are slated to visit, seduced by lovely weather year-round, a couple of direct JetBlue flights, the rumored opening of properties by Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons, and more restaurants per square foot than the trendiest parts of London and NYC.

Recent sightings run the gamut from Keanu Reeves and Clive Owen to Eva Longoria and Shakira to Prince Charles and Camilla. It is also home to the Cartagena International Film Festival and the Hay Festival Cartagena, a literary meeting of the minds frequented by authors like Julian Barnes and Jonathan Franzen. Despite the uptick in interest from abroad, the Caribbean's most beautiful city still retains a quaint charisma, due to its cozy, walkable layout - narrow streets lined with a kaleidoscope of colored colonial homes, dignified plazas, and mom and pop shops (offering everything from coffee to ceviche to emeralds), all cocooned within a walled old town. Romance is an intrinsic part of Cartagena's DNA, as aside from being the setting for the heartbreakingly passionate *Love in the Time of Cholera*, it's where real life Mr. Darcy (AKA Colin Firth) fell for now wife Livia, and the site where former *Vogue* editor Lauren née Davis staged a lavish fairytale wedding to Andres Santo Domingo, as close to a Colombian prince as they come. Who knows what amorous adventures await you on your first trip?

There are loads of stylish accommodation options, from fashion designer owned Tcherassi Hotel + Spa to Andalusian-inspired Casa San Agustin. For a small city, Cartagena has a pulsing energy that comes alive at night. Outlying, graffiti-filled neighborhood Getsemani is the place to see and be seen, and Demente, on lively Trinidad Square, is its most in-demand venue - think a historical house serving up fusion tapas and wine, complete with a bulldog mascot. Back in town, you can decide from a plethora of excellent dining choices, perhaps a sidewalk table at Juan del Mar, the actor's eponymous restaurant known for its heavenly pizza, or La Vitrola, an old school establishment frequented by the creme de la creme of Colombian society, who flock here nightly for a taste of their lauded carpaccio, complete with Cuban house band. Finish your evening at Café Havana, a salsa spot where Hillary Clinton even let her hair down (figuratively, of course) on the dance floor. Although beaches can be found near town, the superior sands lie a short hour's boat ride away in the Rosario Islands National Park, a coral reef archipelago mixed with private homes, small hotels, and uninhabited land that is a must day trip or even overnight sojourn for those looking for true R&R.

Cartagena allows you the kind of trip where you can pack light and stock up local style during your stay. Leave room in your bag for OndadeMar swimsuits, kaftans from concept store St. Dom and pieces from Silvia Tcheressi's boutique, as well as home accessories found at Casa Chiqui. The bag to carry is a mochila, crafted by the native Wayuu Indians - but the fashion set will order a version by Muzungu Sisters ahead of time. For a sundowner at seaside Cafe del Mar, slip into a breezy The Great cotton maxi dress and keep the look cool and casual by adding a Figue Tuk Tuk clutch and Soludos slippers. The afternoons get muy calor, therefore we recommend sporting a shady hat, say from Helen Kaminski, with a simple tank and an airy Missoni wrap skirt, then ditch the headwear and switch to a Cedric Charlier fringe mini for after dark hours. You've managed to take South America's most stylish city by storm - where to next?

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WHERE TO STAY

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The 30-room luxury boutique hotel recently underwent a 15-month renovation, which turned a trio of adjoining colonial-era, white wash mansions into one of the most stunning hotels in Cartagena that carries a cool, hip scene. With beautifully decorated guest rooms and spacious suites with soaring ceilings, Casa San Agustin offers authentic Colombian-style accommodations with modern luxuries for the hip traveler.



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WHERE TO STAY



VACATIONSTYLE

EXPLORE



Walk through the old city during the day and take a horse and carriage by night, you will see two very different (but both magical) sides of the city. Visit Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, a huge fortress dominating the town started in 1639, but was not completed for 150 years. Rent a boat and spend the day (or the night) at the gorgeous Rosario Islands, located south of the Bay of Cartagena, only one hour away by boat. Its crystal clear waters and multicolors are great for recreational diving and kinda makes you feel like you are in Bora Bora for the day. Unfortunately, Cartagena's town does not have the best beaches but in you want to lay out at an upscale beach club Playa Blanca is your place. You can reach it overland or by boat and it's a great way to fit some R&R into the trip! Mud bath up your alley?!?! Going to El Volcan is an hour from the city and is basically a volcano, or mountain of mud. You climb up the hill and there's this natural swimming pool of mud at the top, which you can float in and cover your whole body with...your skin will thank us later. Now for the real deal, the Mercado de Bazaruto is a whirlwind adventure that takes you into the belly of Cartagena and gives a raw, no frills view of the locals who live there. The market is an odd mix of beautiful and ugly as you'll likely find the most colorful, image-worthy fresh fruits being sold steps away from barefooted fishermen standing over tarps of freshly caught fish, as pelicans hover nearby. Mercado de Bazaruto is for the culinary daredevils of the world to see where the local food really comes from! (Tip: get there early and wear closed toed shoes). Limonada de coco: don't leave the city without trying this Cartagena specialty: a frothy, icy blend of coconut water, lime juice, and sugar – the perfect refresher after a day of sightseeing. You can find the sweet-tangy concoction all over, but we like the versions in El Centro's wonderful Mila Cafe, La Mulata and La Paletteria.