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South American

Spontaneous Weekend > Cartagena, Colombia

Think of this newly rediscovered South American gem as Havana without the hassle—a spot where you can wash down pristine seafood with a fresh mojito and shake off the winter in style

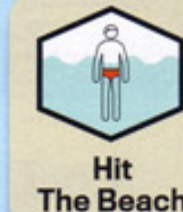
Let's get something straight: It's kahr-tah-heh-nah. And if you're coming to Colombia for the scent of danger, you'll be sorely disappointed here; the biggest threat you're likely to encounter involves horse-drawn carriages and narrow streets. Cartagena puts you at ease. The "gem of a town" analogy is particularly apt: the old city, where you should spend your time, is polished, precious, and relatively small. The bustling squares and colorful colonial homes feel a world apart from the disquieting things you may have read about Colombia. It's a town that doesn't ask much of you—only that you wander down its streets and along the picturesque seawall, pausing at the outdoor cafe tables for a cool mojito. A few days in Cartagena will remind you of the difference between travel and leisure.

The best hotels are short on rooms, but the town is long on renovated manor houses transformed into boutique lodging. The place to stay (and be seen) is the **Tcherassi Hotel** (www.tcherassihotels.com), designer Silvia Tcherassi's sleek oasis of postcard-sized pools. If its seven rooms are spoken for, try **Hotel Agua** (www.hotelagua.com.co), the pioneering Cartagena boutique hotel with a lush and luxe interior courtyard, or the colorful **La Passion Hotel** (www.lapassionhotel.com).

Once you have a room, it's time to lobby for a table at **La Vitrola** (Calle de Baloco 2-01), a restaurant at

the apex of the Cartagena social scene. The food is very good, but even the luscious grouper fillet is less enthralling than the crowd, which, on a recent night, included Gabriel García Márquez holding court at a table near the mellow son cubano band. And while there were no Nobel laureates in evidence at **Don Juan** (Calle del Colegio 34-60) or **8-18** (Calle Gastelbondo 8-18), both have an airy, modern feel and chefs who never disappoint. For lunch, try the justly famous **La Cevichería** (Calle Stuart 7-14) for masterfully marinated fish, or **Donde Socorro** (Calle Larga 8-34) for some heady seafood stew and *limonada de coco*—a frothy blend of coconut and lime juice that has the addictive properties of a better-known Colombian export.

Speaking of which, the nightlife in Cartagena is not the wired scene you might expect—it channels '50s Havana, not '80s Miami. The mirrored communal table at **Bodega de la Iglesia** (Calle de la Iglesia 35-61) gives the wrong impression; the only thing on offer at this quaint wine bar and bottle shop comes from grapes. Stash a bottle of Chilean Pinot Noir in your room and head to the **Sofitel Santa Clara Hotel**, a former seventeenth-century monastery whose lofty choir room has been turned into a stylish lounge, **El Coro** (Calle del Torro 39-29). The bartenders shake daiquiris in time with the live salsa band, and when the room hits a fever



Hit The Beach

While the old city in Cartagena is pretty and pristine, the local beaches are a different story—so for that clear Caribbean water, you'll have to take a boat. Just off the Colombian coast are the Rosario Islands, a coral archipelago covered in lush vegetation. Book a day trip through the Sofitel Santa Clara Hotel (www.sofitel.com) to its Isla Grande resort. For about \$75, they'll ferry you out and back, serve you cocktails on the slivers of beach that line the rock, and grill you up some lunch.

pitch, you can take the stairs down to the candlelit crypt for some monastic quiet. Your next stop should be **Café Havana** (Calle de la Media Luna and Calle del Guerrero)—a blur of salsa dancing under the whirl of ineffectual ceiling fans. Knock back shots of aguardiente with impossibly beautiful women or with the elegant octogenarians—still in top form at 2 a.m.—who dance and dress better than you can ever hope to. You can hardly blame them for seeming so smug and self-possessed; they've known about this town for decades, while you're just catching on.—STAN PARISH

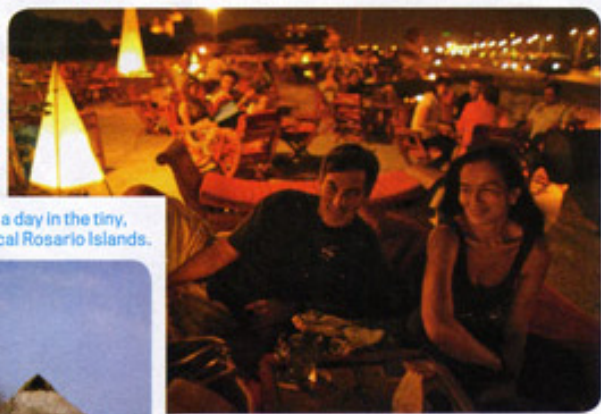
• The terrace overlooking El Coro at the Sofitel.



• One of Cartagena's many vibrant town squares.



• The nightly seaside cocktail scene.



• Spend a day in the tiny, paradisiacal Rosario Islands.



• At 8-18 the ceviche is local and delicious.



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