

# Caribbean Queen

For many centuries, the wealthy port city of Cartagena de Indias was the undisputed queen of the Caribbean. Now, the city reigns anew, as Colombia's latest gastronomic hotspot.

Text & photography *Jurriaan Teulings*



Judging by his tattoos, Jaime Rodríguez is serious about food. On the back of his left hand, an elaborate drawing depicts a bunch of berries from a local palm tree called *corozo*. The gnarly tuber on the right, he explains, is a *cubio*, the staple food from his native state of Boyacá. Both mark the chef's pride in the fabulous diversity of Colombian food.

We meet at Proyecto Caribe.co, his pop-up restaurant at a luxury apartment in the historic heart of Cartagena. Today, this sun-kissed city, beautifully set on a connected set of islands just off Colombia's Caribbean coast, is home to about a million souls and a rich variety of cultures and food. Let's explore this delightful paradise of cuisine and culture.

### Picturesque beauty

In colonial times, this was the wealthiest port of the Caribbean, and it still shows. The rich merchants and aristocrats that lived here liberally invested in lavish villas, churches and convents that survived the centuries relatively unscathed, protected by the towering might of Castillo San Felipe de Barajas, the largest fort of the Americas.

After decades of political turmoil, things are looking up for Colombia, and much of the tourist boom that followed successful peace talks has focused on Cartagena. It's easy to see why. The city may have lost much of its importance since the 19th century, but it never lost its beauty. Snugly wrapped in picturesque colonial walls, it's a fairy-tale maze of cobbled alleys lined with fabulous colonial architecture awash with bougainvillea. The only traffic jams here are caused by horse-drawn carriages. Colonial mansions have been snapped up one by one and turned into gorgeous boutique hotels, such as Casa Pestagua in the palatial residence of an 18th-century count or Casa San Agustín in a series of interconnected 17th-century merchant homes – their palm-shaded courtyards filled with intimate restaurants and

## The only traffic jams are caused by horse-drawn carriages

swimming pools. With the rise of high-end hospitality, gastronomy soon followed.

This is how Jaime Rodríguez came to Cartagena. After a stint at the renowned, three-Michelin starred Akelarre in San Sebastián (Spain), he was appointed head chef at El Gobernador By Rausch, a new restaurant venture by Jorge Rausch, a culinary icon from Bogotá. The restaurant, located in the courtyard of the Bastión Luxury Hotel, soon became – and still is – one of the most exquisite fine-dining options in the old town. Of course, he wasn't the only young and highly-skilled chef who seized the opportunity to distinguish himself in the city's burgeoning culinary scene. Before him, Alejandro Ramírez opened his first restaurant, María, just around the corner. His résumé is no less impressive, including Gordon Ramsay in London and Pujol in Mexico City.

### Prison meal

It's fair to say that the ambitions for Cartagena are sky-high. Since last December, even the local women's prison has gotten in on the action. As part of a social reintegration programme conceived by Colombian actress Johanna Bahamón, the inmates have received training and recipes from top chefs around the country. The inner courtyard has been brightened up with floral murals and turned into a restaurant, aptly named Interno. The quality of the menu, ranging from ceviche >

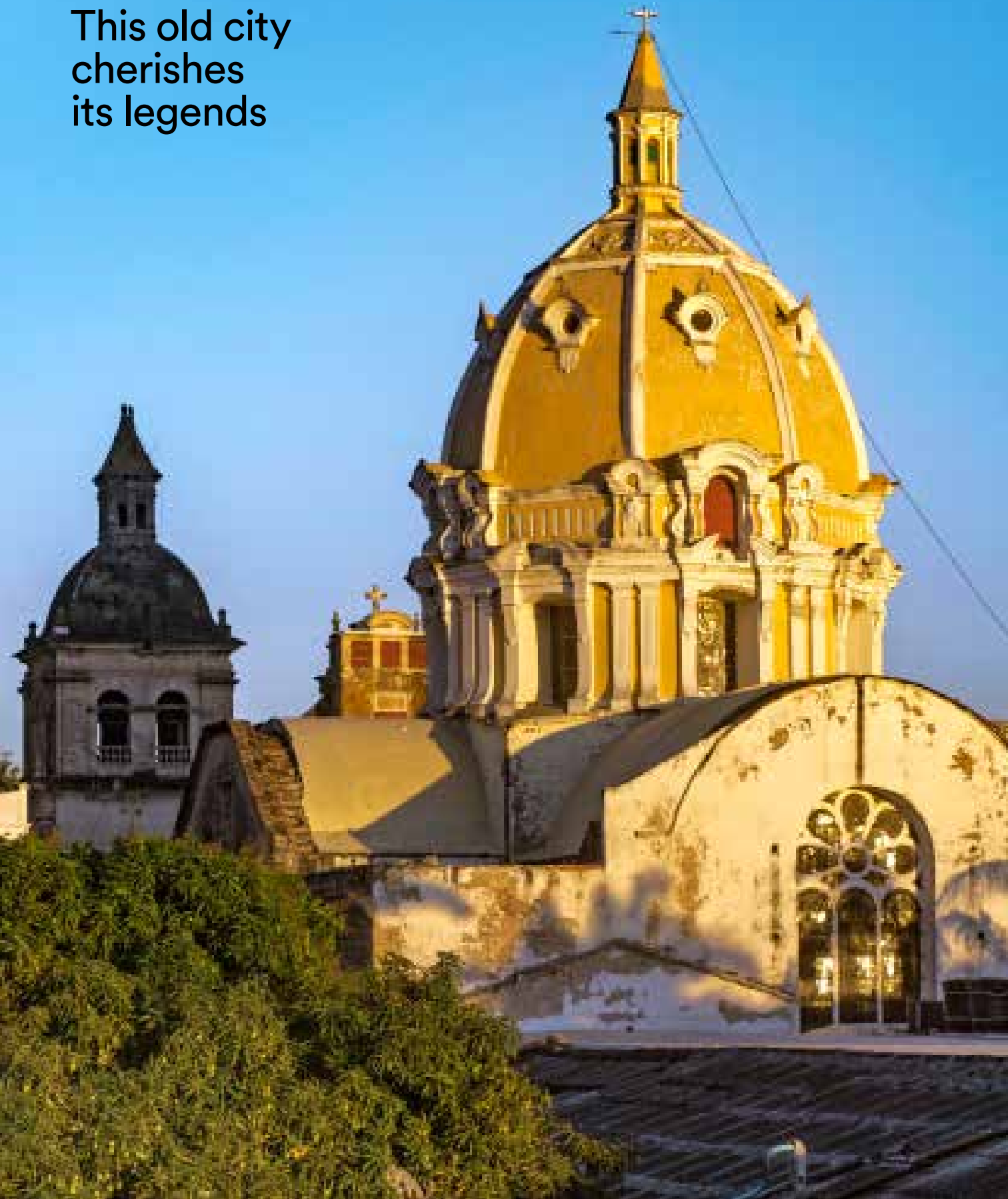
**Previous pages:** Plaza Santo Domingo (left); University of Cartagena (right).

**Right page (clockwise from top left):** fresh food is everywhere on the streets of Cartagena; paradise island Isla Múcura; classic door knocker on one of the many colourful doors; modern-day relaxing on Las Murallas, the city's colonial defensive walls.



Cartagena

This old city  
cherishes  
its legends





Proyecto Caribe.co (top left)

**Previous pages:** dome of the Cathedral of San Pedro Claver (left); Restaurant-Bar Alma, a gourmet restaurant with live music and a cocktail bar (right).

**Left page (clockwise from top left):** a salad with the local Moncholo river fish, served at pop-up restaurant Proyecto Caribe.co; just hanging around in the village of San Basilio de Palenque; one of the many trendy eateries in the Getsemani neighbourhood; a *Palenquera* fruit seller.

and classic *Posta Negra Cartagenera* (slow-cooked beef with a dark sauce of cinnamon and cane sugar) with coconut rice, is surprisingly high. The atmosphere is friendly and relaxed, though, admittedly, it's hard to shake the rather strange feeling that your friendly waitress may well be a murderer.

Proyecto Caribe.co was launched last August, after Rodriguez left El Gobernador By Rausch behind and teamed up with his partner Sebastián Pinzón. Together they are quite the dream team. Pinzón earned his credentials at Gustu, the surprise restaurant venture by Danish superstar chef Claus Meyer in the Bolivian city of La Paz. Their mission is to introduce the world to the delights of what they refer to as New Caribbean Cuisine. The single table at the apartment – which seats a maximum of 14 diners – has quickly become one of the most sought-after in town. It's open only on Thursdays; the rest of the week is reserved for travel and research. Long road trips are gastronomic expeditions for the chef duo, capturing the forgotten traditions of markets and villages along the coast. Found treasures, and the experiments these inspire, are posted on Instagram: wild pigs at the sprawling Bazarro Market at Cartagena's Bay of Souls; preservation techniques of the local Wayuu tribes living on the arid plains of the La Guajira Peninsula; or steamed plantain rolls wrapped in heliconia leaves in a dusty colonial town along the Magdalena River.

On tonight's menu, Rodriguez' favourite *corozo* berries appear in a chilled, tangy broth mixed with unripe coconut and poured over a bowl of slowly-cooked lobster and fleshy succulent purslane leaves. The artful *Cóctel de Camarón* (prawn cocktail) is a play on one of the most common dishes at local beach restaurants, presented on a crisp wafer of Wayuu-style dried shrimp atop a smooth chunk of white coral. At dessert, one of the guests – an elderly lady in a sequined red dress – notices that the flavour of the unfamiliar-looking fruit on her plate has sparked long-forgotten

## Members of the local population were encouraged to write down recipes

memories of her childhood. The chefs are delighted – even more so, when she promises to bring them her mother's old recipe book.

### Urban legends

This old city cherishes its legends. Ask anyone about the greatest Colombian who ever lived, and they'll tell you it's the Nobel prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez, affectionally known as 'Gabo'. His talent to capture everyday life on the streets of Cartagena and infuse it with magic is revered by young and old alike. The "hot clamour of shoeshine boys and the bird sellers, the hawkers of cheap books and the witch doctors and the sellers of sweets who shouted over the din of the crowd" – a scene straight from the pages of Gabo's famous novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) – is not that hard to find in 21st-century Cartagena. Nowadays, there is even a four-hour long street food tour that follows the literary giant's references to Cartagena's many fried delights: *Arepa de Huevo* (twice-fried cornbread, stuffed with an egg), *Carimañolas* (cassava fritters with meat or cheese) and *Bollos de Maíz* (steamed corn buns), sliced and skewered with pieces of *Queso Costeño* (fresh and salty cheese). A popular stall next to the clock gate sells fresh *Patacones* (twice-fried green plantains served with cheese or sour cream). >

**Places to eat & drink**

**Proyecto Caribe.co**  
Highly innovative New Caribbean cuisine by two of Colombia's rising stars. They're too cool for a website; reservations can be made via [Instagram @proyectocaribe.co](#)

**María**  
Modern Colombian cuisine enriched with international touches by chef Alejandro Ramirez. Ask about his tours of the Bazaruto market. [mariacartagena.com](#)

**El Gobernador By Rausch**  
Easily the most elegant restaurant in town by famous Bogotá chef Jorge Rausch. [bastionluxuryhotel.com](#)

**El Barón**  
A favourite of local chefs, as it prepares the best cocktails in town. Order the Gin Basil Smash. [elbaron.co](#)

**Cafe Havana**  
Famous for its salsa music and lively atmosphere. [cafehavanacartagena.com](#)

**Demente**  
A cosy tapas bar, where you can indulge in Dictador rum. [Facebook @demente.com.co](#)

**Café del Mural**  
Coffee savant David Arzayus brews only the purest and the most unusual coffee treats. [Facebook @CafedelMural](#)

**Bazaruto Social Club**  
Get to know *champeta*, a popular Colombian music and dance style. [bazarutosocialclub.com](#)

**Places to stay**

**Casa Pestagua**  
Boasting elaborate centuries-old frescoes, this grande dame of Cartagena's boutique hotels is housed inside the palatial residence of an 18th-century count. The 11 suites are decorated with 19th-century antiques and outfitted with 21st-century comforts around a palm-shaded courtyard. A favourite of celebrities. [hotelboutique-casapestagua.com](#)

**Casa San Agustín**  
The most fabulous lodging in town, located in three 17th-century mansions decorated with local antiques. Two courtyards have been connected to accommodate a pool, while a third serves as the outdoor seating area of Restaurant-Bar Alma, which is run by renowned native chef Heberto Eljach. [hotelcasasanagustin.com](#) [almacolombia.com](#)

**Anandá Hotel Boutique**  
The name of this eclectically-decorated haven is Sanskrit for 'state of bliss'. Notably, it has two pools: one in the courtyard and one on the roof. [anandacartagena.com](#)

**San Lázaro Art Lifestyle Hotel**  
Affordable but comfortable alternative to the pricey lodging within the old city walls. As a bonus, it's situated a few steps from the impressive Castillo San Felipe de Barajas. The view of the fort from the rooftop bar is pretty hard to beat. [sanlazaroarthotel.com](#)

**Right page (clockwise from top left):** mural in the Getsemani neighbourhood; night view of Cartagena; lobster confit in coconut oil, cold infusion of corozo fruit, purslane and tender coconut, served at Proyecto Caribe.co; chefs preparing a dish at Proyecto Caribe.co restaurant.

Just outside the building that houses Proyecto Caribe.co stretches El Portal de los Dulces, an arcaded walkway where candy sellers hawk bright concoctions of dried fruit and cane sugar from glass jars. They have been doing so for many generations. Around the corner, the gaudy, flounced dresses of the fruit-selling *Palenqueras* are a victory of centuries-old folklore over fashion. These colourfully-clad ladies, named after the village of San Basilio de Palenque in the hills southeast of Cartagena, have a story to tell that is as fascinating and quintessentially Colombian as any Gabo novel. They are the descendants of a group of escaped slaves, who in the early 17th century took refuge in the hills outside Cartagena and proceeded to attack incoming slave ships. Their resistance was so successful that the Spanish Crown, desperate for them to stop, issued a royal decree guaranteeing their freedom, thus making them the first freed slaves in the Americas. This freedom helped to preserve a unique culture, language and cuisine, but most of the traditions were never documented until only a few years ago. As part of a literacy programme, members of the local population were encouraged to write down recipes, which were then bundled and published, and after having competed against 15,000 books from 184 countries, went on to win the top prize of the prestigious Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in 2014. Quite a feat for a village of 3,500 in the sticks.

**Lazy days**  
Though a lot of the recipes are quite similar to what's already available in traditional *costeño* ('coastal') restaurants in the city, I decide to visit San Basilio de Palenque to experience the real deal: a home-cooked lunch of *Cabezas de Gato* (literally 'cats' heads', but actually a typical dish of golf ball-sized scoops of mashed plantain mixed with onion and garlic) and *Sancocho* (stew of plantain and yucca), followed by a creole chicken dish served with *Patacones* (twice-fried mashed plantains) and coconut rice. >



Proyecto Caribe.co (bottom right)

# Cartagena



Jasmijn Evans/Art Associates

- 1 Castillo San Felipe de Barajas
- 2 Casa San Agustín hotel
- 3 María restaurant
- 4 El Gobernador By Rausch restaurant/  
Bastión Luxury Hotel
- 5 Isla Múcura
- 6 Café del Mar
- 7 El Portal de los Dulces walkway
- 8 Plaza de la Santísima Trinidad
- 9 Café Havana
- 10 Casa Pestagua hotel

## Things to do

### Isla Múcura/Punta Faro

Add a few lazy beach days to your itinerary and hop on the speed boat to the lovely and unpretentious Punta Faro resort at Isla Múcura, a paradise island with crystalline waters, mangroves and palm-fringed beaches. Go kayaking or snorkelling, or experience swimming with bioluminescent algae at full moon.  
[puntafaro.com](http://puntafaro.com)

### Las Murallas

At dusk, the city's massive ramparts, once designed to keep pirates out, are besieged with lovers, musicians and tourists, squeezed between cannons and embrasures to salute the departing sun. At Café del Mar, the salty breeze carries sultry tunes from a 16th-century sentry post that has become the DJ booth.

### Foodies

A street food tour based on Gabriel García Márquez' favourite snacks? A home-cooked meal at San Basilio de Palenque? Make sure to book a local foodie for better insights and great company.  
[tiendafoodies.com](http://tiendafoodies.com)

### Independence of Cartagena City Day

In the first week of November (culminating on the 11th), you'll encounter the kind of blissful mayhem that elsewhere is reserved for carnival. Think parades, floats, beauty queens, water throwing and spraying with foam. This is when Cartagena celebrates its declaration of independence, which was signed on 11 November 1811, making it the first Colombian city to free itself of Spain.

More interesting than any of these dishes is an unsmiling man named Florentino, who is presented as the creator of my dessert – a glutinous cake of yucca called *Enyucado*. He is also the town healer, and puts a bottle stuffed with seven different herbs on the table, stating that these, when mixed with rum, prevent fever, burns, hangovers and spells, in addition to making you invisible to thieves.

A century after the liberation of the people of San Basilio de Palenque, freed slaves also played a key role in the independence of Cartagena. Their contribution is honoured with a series of bronze statues on Plaza de la Santísima Trinidad, the central square of Cartagena's Getsemani neighbourhood. Today, this area east of the colonial centre is a place peppered with bright graffiti and raw energy. Thanks to its artistic bent, expressed in wall-filling murals and a proliferation of jugglers, musicians and street artists, it has become the cultural quarter – a more lived-in, casually hip corner of town. Days are lazy, with locals playing chess on street corners while enjoying a beer from the corner shops. At night, it transforms into the throbbing heart of Cartagena's exuberant nightlife, when the plaza – with its little bars and restaurants – hosts live performances. Before heading to Cafe Havana – the city's most popular salsa joint – or having a go at the high-energy *champeta* dance at Bazarro Social Club, the Demente bar is worth a pitstop. This bar's menu distinguishes itself with the cream of Colombian craft beers and Dictador, Cartagena's top-quality rum. The latter is praised for its soft flavours of caramel, cocoa and honey, and produced in award-winning limited editions. In fact, it might just be delicious enough to justify a tattoo. ■

With special thanks to Sapa Pana Travel ([sapapanatravel.nl](http://sapapanatravel.nl)), specialist in tailor-made individual travel, premium group travel and exclusive car journeys to Latin America.

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