

Experience Cartagena, Colombia through its food, history and culture

By Karen Catchpole, Jul 2020



The colonial heart of Cartagena, Colombia, bursts with culture, history and food. Whether you want to explore artifacts from the time of the Spanish Inquisition, savor innovative seafood dishes or marvel at modern Colombian art, here are the best ways for you to enjoy this historic Caribbean city.

Travel back in time

Spanish conquistadors established Cartagena in the 1500s, and it was a crucial port town protected by a fortified wall and a massive hilltop fort. The original center of Cartagena was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1984 in recognition of the remains of South America's most extensive military fortification system. But the Spanish colonial history in Cartagena is more than walls and forts. These historical sites are definitely worth the visit.

Colonial architecture

Cartagena brims with houses, churches and other structures built during colonial times. Now largely restored, these examples of colonial architecture are often painted in vibrant Caribbean colors and covered in flowering vines. Admire the architecture while wandering Cartagena's cobblestone streets, and don't miss the whimsical metal knockers found on many front doors.



Explore the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, a restored fort built during the Spanish colonial era.

Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas

The Spanish built many forts during their colonization of the New World, but the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas atop San Lazaro Hill in the Pie Del Cerro neighborhood is one of the most formidable. Erected in 1536, the squat stone structure is still a sight to behold. Arrive right when the fort opens at 8 a.m. to beat the heat and the crowds. Bring a flashlight, too, to explore the fort's fascinating interior corridors and tunnels.

Palacio de la Inquisicion

The imposing Palacio de la Inquisicion, just off Plaza Bolivar, was once where officers of the Inquisition publicly denounced religious heretics. The historic building is now home to the [Museo Historico de Cartagena de Indias](#), where you can view art and artifacts from the pre-Hispanic era through the 19th century. Look for the small window where inquisitors passed their judgment on those who didn't pass religious scrutiny.

Savor local flavor

Cartagena is one of the biggest foodie destinations in Colombia; it's home to countless options for Caribbean flavors, kitchen creativity and fresh seafood. Try these picks for a smattering of what the city has to offer.

La Cocina de Pepina

The quaint and festive La Cocina de Pepina, on a small side street in the Getsemani neighborhood, has been serving creative takes on authentic Caribbean dishes for years. Start with the sweet and sour *corozo* juice, a local favorite, then select from a small menu that includes the restaurant's beloved *arroz apastelado* (stewed rice with vegetables, pork and sweet plantains) and stuffed peppers.

Carmen Cartagena

American chefs Carmen Angel and Rob Pevitts present international cuisine in a minimalist indoor-outdoor setting at [Carmen Cartagena](#). Try the crispy *chistilla* (a chicharron and pork rib double cut), or sample the *posta*, traditional Caribbean slow-cooked beef brisket with coconut spaetzle, avocado and a homemade tail reduction.

El Boliche Cebicheria

El Boliche Cebicheria is a tiny spot with a big reputation for inventive ceviches and seafood dishes. The tender crab claw soup and the popcorn-topped ceviche are just two of the standouts here. Reservations are a must.

Revel in rich culture

Cartagena's cultural side is happening: glittering traditional jewelry, modern art and sites that inspired Colombia's most famous writer.



Visit Plaza de los Coches, which was referenced in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Of Love and Other Demons."

Gabriel Garcia Marquez walking tour

Cartagena, Colombia inspired the Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, author of "Love in the Time of Cholera" and other noteworthy novels. Sign up for the three-hour guided [Route of Gabriel Garcia Marquez walking tour](#) to visit dozens of sites that figured prominently in his works and his life.

The Museo de Arte Moderno de Cartagena

The [Museo de Arte Moderno de Cartagena](#) is a two-story structure on Plaza de San Pedro Claver. Inside, the galleries are roomy, light-filled and full of modern Colombian paintings and sculptures, including several works by Colombian artist Enrique Grau.

Museo del Oro Zenu

The [Museo del Oro Zenu](#) is wrapping up a multiyear renovation to upgrade everything from its facilities to the audiovisual descriptions of the more than 500 pieces of handcrafted gold jewelry and artifacts in its collection. Every masterful piece was made by members of the ancient Zenu people who once flourished in Cartagena.

The marvels of Cartagena, Colombia, are everywhere you turn. Discover this incredible city through history, food and culture to fully experience everything it has to offer.