ON THE
WATERFRONT

CAN CARTAGENA, SOUTH AMERICA'S CARIBBEAN-COLONIAL GEM, ESCAPE ITS DARK REPUTATION OF RECENT YEARS?

WORDS & PHOTOS **JUSTINE LOPEZ**

The city of Cartagena lies along the shimmering ocean on Colombia's northern coast, a sun-drenched metropolis boasting historical charms.

Despite its growing popularity and its reputation as the safest city in Colombia, Cartagena is still very much marred by the civil strife that plagued the country during the 1980s and '90s. As a consequence, many would-be visitors are deterred from traveling there.

During my recent jaunt to the city, thoughts of Pablo Escobar, drug trafficking and FARC kidnappings were in the forefront of my mind. But what I experienced instead was a laidback beachside community filled with carefree beach-goers, vacationing Colombian families and curious history buffs. There was no sign of the violence I'd been warned about by concerned family and friends prior to my trip.

The reality is that Colombia has come a long way to restore its image in recent years. And for visitors who are willing to make the journey, they will find that contemporary Cartagena is shaped by a much mor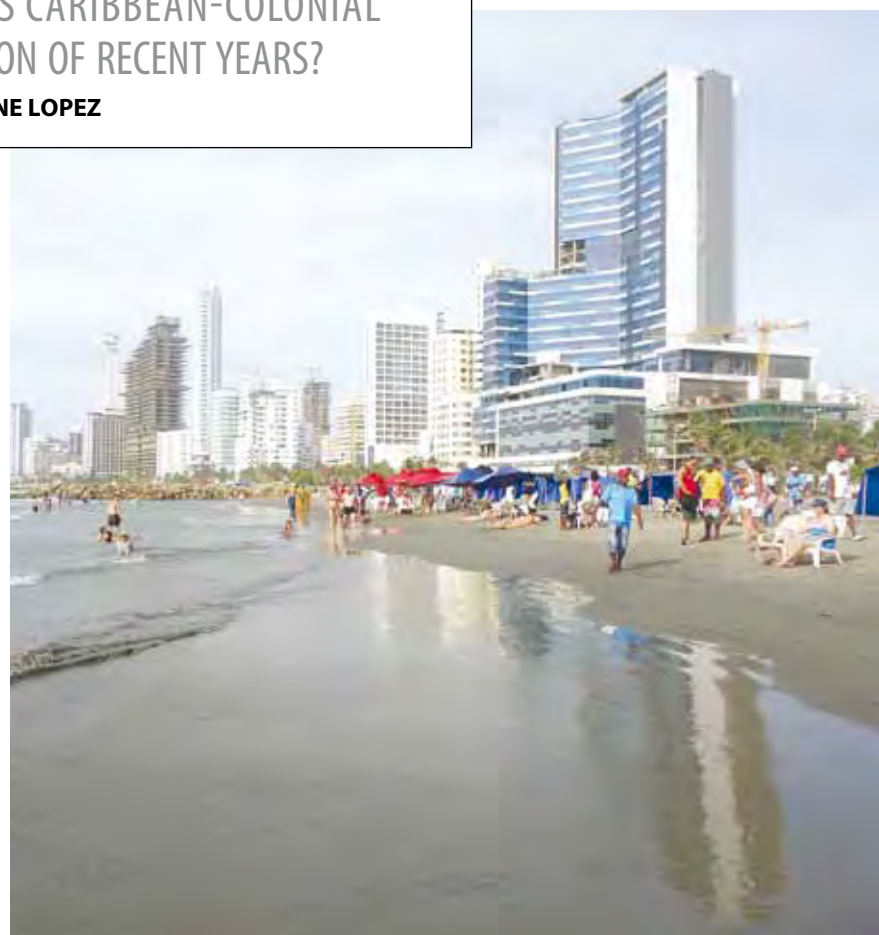e sordid history; a history that has nothing to do with drugs or cartels but is instead colored by pirates, gold and slaves. And it was this chapter in Cartagena's past that lured me there.

Founded by the Spanish in 1533, Cartagena was once one of the most important ports in the New World. Because of its booming gold, sugar and slaves trades, the city enjoyed extreme amounts of wealth, as is evidenced by the 18th century mansions that still dot the city.

Because of its riches, Cartagena was the victim of numerous attacks by gold-seeking pirates and power-hungry explorers, like Sir Francis Drake. Because of these relentless attempts to loot and seize control of the city, the Spanish took drastic measures to protect their interests.

In the 17th century, the Spanish began constructing an 11-kilometer wall, known as Las Murallas, around the city. Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas – one of the largest fortresses in the Spanish empire – was also built during this time. The project took over 200 years to complete and is largely the reason this historic city is still standing today.

Aside from its beaches, contemporary Cartagena is best known for its impeccably preserved walled city, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984. These historical relics made me willing to brave the sweltering 31ºC Caribbean heat in order to spend the afternoon exploring the city's historic center.

As I entered Las Murallas, ducking underneath one of its many narrow archways, I was awed at the sheer size of the structure – which measures multiple stories high and as much as 20 meters thick – and how it had managed to survive centuries of relentless assaults, corrosive sea spray and brutal storms.

It's possible to walk along the top of the wall, so I made the ascent and took a seat next to one of the many old canons that are aimed toward the open ocean. Grateful for the ocean breeze, I looked out over the sea and took a moment to try to wrap my mind around everything that had taken place on this very site – from the arrival of Spanish *conquistadores* to

the vicious pirate attacks to the horrific slave auctions. Imagining these things left me feeling slightly unsettled.

Once I retreated inside the walls and entered the near-perfectly preserved colonial neighborhoods of El Centro and San Diego, the atmosphere immediately became more serene and idyllic, with the melodic strumming of Spanish guitars, the pink blooms of bougainvillea, the scents of freshly made *arepas de huevo* (a cornmeal patties stuffed with fried egg) and *empandas* (cheese-filled pastries).

I ambled along the mazelike cobblestone streets, past row upon row of vibrantly painted Spanish-colonial houses. Some of these buildings were still in pristine condition, while most had been restored and turned into trendy tourist-oriented businesses.

PLACES & SPACES

There was no end to intriguing places to stay, eat and socialize in the old city. There were chic bed and breakfasts tucked behind thick, ornate doorways. Centuries-old houses had been transformed into boutique shops and atmospheric bars and restaurants where patrons sipped fresh fruit juices and *mojitos* (a refreshing concoction of

mint, sparkling water and rum) and snacked on a traditional Colombian meals of *carne* (meat) beans, rice and plantains.

However, not all of Cartagena's colonial structures were so carefully cared for. Many were in fact abandoned long ago, fallen victim to overgrown ivy and tropical moisture. Yet, with their adornment of peeling paint, untamed bougainvillea and stylish street art, these structures were almost more picturesque than the perfectly maintained ones.

Like most cities in Latin America, Cartagena's

old town was built around *plazas* (town squares), all of which have a similar scene. In Cartagena, there was always a towering church on one end, the din of tourists chattering at an outdoor café on the other, and a handful of elderly Colombian men playing chess somewhere in between.

There were ubiquitous vendors selling fedoras, locally crafted jewelry and colorful paintings. There were food carts set up on each street corner selling fruity snow cones, fresh cane juice and cheesy *arepas* (a popular snack throughout Colombia) for less than US$1.

Spending the day inside the protective embrace of the walled city, it was easy to forget that Cartagena actually lies along the ocean. After I'd had my fill of the city's rich history and culture, I exited the old town and bid farewell to Las Murralas. I strolled along the beachfront, which extends as far as the eye can see, and relished the opportunity to bask in the sea breeze and wade into the cool Caribbean water.

I politely waved off the swarms of hawkers, who assaulted me with smiles and offers of *ceviche* (a citrusy seafood dish), massages, hair braiding and snorkeling trips. And I watched large Colombian families, who had camped out on the beach for the day, as they frolicked in the waves, drank *Aguilas* (a popular Colombian beer) and swayed their hips to the music emanating from a nearby restaurant.

Despite its tumultuous history and unsavory stereotypes, the real Cartagena was nothing like I'd imagined. Aside from its impressive and fascinating historical sights, the city showed no signs of the violent history that still preoccupies the outside world and keeps people from visiting. As they say in Colombia, *¡qué lástima!* (what a shame!) because Cartagena is a truly remarkable city. ∎

MUST-SEES

Plaza de Bolívar: Filled with shady trees and lined with vendors selling touristy trinkets, this is one of the best known squares in the old town.

Palacio de la Inquisición: This museum is probably the most visited attraction in Cartagena. A quick tour offers visitors a glimpse into the city's cruel past ($9). It houses an eerie display of the instruments of torture that were once used by the Catholic Church to punish suspected heretics during the Spanish Inquisition.

Iglesia Santo Domingo (the Church of Santo Domingo): Located inside the walled city, this magnificent church is a must-visit. Built in the 16th century, it once housed Dominican monks and is now a popular tourist site.

Castillo San Felipe de Barajas: Built over 300 years ago, this military fortress withstood attacks from English and French invaders and is one of the most robust forts in all of the Americas.

Convento de la Popa (the Convent of the Stern): Located on the highest point in Cartagena is this 15th-century convent. In addition to touring the grounds, visitors can also take in some of the best views in town.