



{rokbox title=|Golf Channel graba Especial sobre campos y oferta turística|}images/stories/cartagena.jpg{/rokbox}

For centuries foreigners have been lured in to the charm of the colonial city. New immigrants are creating businesses and contributing to Colombia's progress.

Cartagena, the walled city on the Colombian Caribbean declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985, is the country's most popular destination for first-time visitors. A monument to history, it is in no way destined to yield only to its past. Its vibrant streets behold everyday life and offer many a crossroads to a new start.

No stranger to foreigners, the city was a strategic military, political and commercial stronghold during the Spanish conquest and colonial times. Natives and peoples from Africa, the Middle East and Europe gave rise to a rich and complex culture where the old and the modern continue to capture the hearts of many.

Modern immigrants to Cartagena are as diverse as their predecessors. From all walks of life, they have surrendered to chance and made a life in a city they now call home.

Such is the Case of Hans Blumenthal, a German sociologist and economist, who will receive his Colombian citizenship this year after living on and off in the country for 11 years. As the former director of Fescol -an NGO that works on democracy and post-conflict issues-, he has gotten to know Colombia in its most profound expression.

For this erudite thinker "Cartagena is home and has its own emotional appeal. I arrived here as a romantic. I like the lightness of the 'Caribe'. The walled city is a place where you can walk for years and months and still be seduced by its beauty."

Geoff Chew, a 65 year-old Englishman, was determined to sail the world until he docked in Cartagena in 2003 after navigating from Europe. "I found Cartagena to be relaxed and multiracial. People enjoyed freedom. It was architecturally remarkable," he explains.

On his journey north he was shipwrecked off the coast of San Andrés, and was forced to return to Cartagena for repairs. During that time, he consolidated a relationship with Carmen Marrugo, whom he later married, and became a partner in the Casa La Fe.

“It was a touristy city but at the same time it was a living city. Unlike others, Cartagena has a reason to be, it exists apart from tourism, and the two are well-fused together,” says this retired engineer.

Chew has seen the hotel industry expand. When he opened Casa La Fe in 2005, five hotels operated in the old center. Now, there are 70. The New York Times and The Sunday Times recommend Casa La Fe as a pristine and affordable accommodation option.

Michael Parks, an experienced sea captain of large vessels, arrived in Cartagena in 2006. Finding a safe haven from the hurricane zone – below 12.5 degrees latitude – he reluctantly chose Cartagena as a shelter from the storms. “I was very nervous. All I heard was the bad news,” he confesses.

Within a month he had met Martha Sánchez, his current partner, and had convinced the owner of the boat to do a general overhaul in Cartagena. The Endeavour lasted three months. “I was lucky to stay as long as I did and get a feel for the place,” says the captain.

Parks’s good luck has also been good for Colombia. As a respected mariner, he worked to include Cartagena for the first time in the 2010 Superyacht Services Guide to the Southern Caribbean (entries included by captain referral only), promoting the port as a safe hub in the region.

Colombia has been included in different travel guides thanks to the independent initiative of foreign visitors and residents. Such is the case with Bistro, a German co-owned restaurant and bakery in the historic center. Publications such as Lonely Planet and the Richard Wiese Travel Guide have reviewed it favorably.

Bistro offers good food at reasonable prices. It is also a popular meeting place for

backpackers. Mirko Wolz and Lars Brurein relocated the restaurant to Cartagena's historic center from Popayán in 2002. "People are open, nice and cordial. Sure there are problems, but I love it here," Wolz explains as to his life-changing decision.

Wolz came to Colombia from East Berlin one month before the fall of the Wall in 1989 on his way to Central America. It took him four days to fall in love with Colombia. It was the first of many trips that led him to settle in Popayán four years later.

The friendliness of the locals draws foreigners deep into the fortress city. For many, such as Gilles Dupart, a 53 year-old Parisian chef and photographer, it has walled him in.

He moved to Cartagena in 2007 with his Colombian wife, Carolina Vélez, to raise their daughter and open their own restaurant. Oh La La is the name of a dream come true, offering local food prepared with French techniques.

"I haven't left the Old City. I can find all I need within these walls. Besides the language, which is a real challenge for me, I function. I found here a sense of wellbeing I haven't anywhere else," he assures, while organizing his kitchen for lunch.

Whether bound to history or living in the glass skyscrapers of modern Cartagena, the city's growing tourism industry has made it possible for Jules Baker, 36, to build a business far from the grip of the corporate world.

Baker arrived with his wife, Juliana Bravo, in 2007 to check out her hometown and learn Spanish to further his career. The move became permanent after the economic meltdown of 2008. "Here, no matter what, people generally smile, and that blows me away," Baker says.

"I love every minute of living in Cartagena, as much as living with a Colombian family. I have become immersed socially and businesswise with them, and that has set my world apart," Baker assures.

Commuting between the new and the old to run his travel business, Colombia Direct, is a refreshing routine for Baker. This entrepreneur believes that the experiences tourists take home with them makes it worthwhile.

As strong as family ties are, so too are childhood memories. Claes Bobeck, 62, first arrived in Colombia as a teenager from Sweden when his mother remarried. He lived in Medellín for two years. Off to school in his native country, he promised himself one day to return. He did in 2000.

A successful designer, with more than 40 retail stores in his portfolio, he came to revamp service businesses in Cartagena. His lifelong plans to move to Cartagena were interrupted when he was forced to move back to Uppsala (Sweden), diagnosed with a severe case of diabetes. The doctor's prognosis was bleak. Claes took life-changing decisions: fight diabetes, divorce his wife and develop his jewelry business – Ceon - out of Cartagena.

“Growing old in a country such as mine is very hard, the system tends to push you out. Here I can do my work, and people respect me for it,” he assures.

Pinpointing what makes people like Claes leave all behind is not easy, but as he says regarding Cartagena: “There are negative things, but there is something in the air that makes it cool. People don't stress, they are on Cartagena time. There is a sense of freedom beyond what developed countries and typical tourist towns can offer.”

Learn more about Colombia:

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- [One of the largest and most luxurious ships in the world will arrive in Colombia on cruise season](#)
- [The Seminars of "Benefits of the Cruise Industry" in Cartagena and Santa Marta](#)