

# TRAVELER

All Travel, All the Time

Jan/Feb 2010 \$4.99

WHERE TO STAY NOW ~ EDITED by SUSAN O'KEEFE

## HOTEL CENTRAL



### Cartagena's Colonial Chic

New boutique hotels transform the Old City. By JOHN ROSENTHAL

**F**or centuries, fortified stone walls have protected the Old City section of Cartagena, Colombia, from pirates and other invading armies. But until recently, less belligerent visitors had few lodging options in the center of this pulsing Caribbean port. In the 21st century, however, that's changing—almost daily—as entrepreneurs snap up dilapidated colonial mansions and turn them into charming boutique hotels. Just 12 such lodgings welcomed visitors in 2007, according to the visitors bureau; today,

more than 30 do. A renovation boom has brought an \$80-million infusion into the economy and a renaissance of interest in the walled city as a premier cultural and historic attraction. Here are six memorable places to lodge for the night.

There's no sign for the **Hotel Agua** ([www.hotelagua.com.co](http://www.hotelagua.com.co); from \$299), ensconced behind two carriage-size doors. You (or your cab driver) have to know where you're going. Step into this oasis of calm and you'd hardly know there's a bustling city beyond the threshold. You feel like you're in a 17th-century Spanish colonial house in the tropics—which you

are. The Agua started Cartagena's boutique trend in 2003. Its six guest rooms boast an eclectic selection of antiques from around the world plus modern conveniences. Apple iPods sit in sound docks, pre-loaded with calypso playlists. Plantation shutters are ingeniously backed by glass windows that seal tight for steamy nights when air-conditioning

**In Cartagena, hotels break the high-rise mold with the townhouse-style Hotel LM and the sublime 17th-century Casa Pestagua (upper).**

trumps the romance of the ceiling fan.

A colonial exterior, complete with wood-balustraded balconies, belies the supermodern interior of the **Delirio** ([www.deliriohotel.com](http://www.deliriohotel.com); from \$123). The juxtaposition of old and new continues inside the 17 small but sleek guest rooms. Behind the headboards are mural-size versions of Hernán Díaz's black-and-white photos of Cartagena at mid-century. The Delirio's modernity might feel stark were it not for the hospitality, which begins with a chilled glass of purple passion fruit juice upon your arrival. Orange accents the bright white decor throughout the hotel nowhere better than on the rooftop patio and bar. There, it complements the peach and persimmon color of the nearby Cathedral de Santa Catalina de Alejandria, which rises over the old city.

With just seven rooms secreted about its two floors, the **Hotel LM** ([www.hotel-lm.com](http://www.hotel-lm.com); from \$395) feels less like a hotel than a luxury townhouse. From the ground floor sitting rooms to the rooftop pool, terrace, bar, and tented massage cabana, the LM invites languor. If cooking is your relaxation of choice, you'll find everything you need in the hotel's open professional kitchen. The chefs will even instruct you on how to make a Colombian arepa. Barstools around the main counter welcome those who'd prefer to watch.

Check into **Casa Pestagua** ([www.casa-pestagua.com](http://www.casa-pestagua.com); from \$290, rate includes a



## Hotel Central

mini foot massage) and you'll get the feeling you've walked into a Gabriel García Márquez novel (the Nobel Prize-winning author still maintains a house in Cartagena). This restored 17th-century home boasts antiques and period furniture with a few modern touches like Wi-Fi in its 11 rooms and suites and chrome barstools in the minimalist lobby bar. Of course no Márquez character ever had it so good, not with a sparkling ground-floor pool and a top-floor whirlpool.

At **Hotel Alfiz** ([www.hotelalfiz.com](http://www.hotelalfiz.com); from \$152), a 16th-century colonial house converted to a hotel in 2007, each of the seven guest rooms evokes an important period in Cartagena's history. Mosquito-netted twin beds furnish the Conquest Room; a hammock beckons in the Indigenous Peoples' room; replicas of tall ships and pillowcases with the tricolor flag and the Union Jack in the Pirates' Room recall the many times French and English pirates tried to sack the city.

The **Tcherassi Hotel and Spa** ([www.tcherassihotels.com](http://www.tcherassihotels.com); from \$295) is a converted, 250-year-old mansion named for Silvia Tcherassi, a Colombia-born designer located in Miami. Her goal was to fashion a hotel that "captures the Caribbean spirit and magic surrealism of Cartagena." Her imprint is everywhere in the seven large guest rooms, from the Egyptian cotton linens to the bathroom amenities to the fabric of the "Do Not Disturb" signs. The hotel's restaurant Vera serves Italian coastal classics like risotto pescatore.



The Tcherassi is Cartagena's newest hotel.