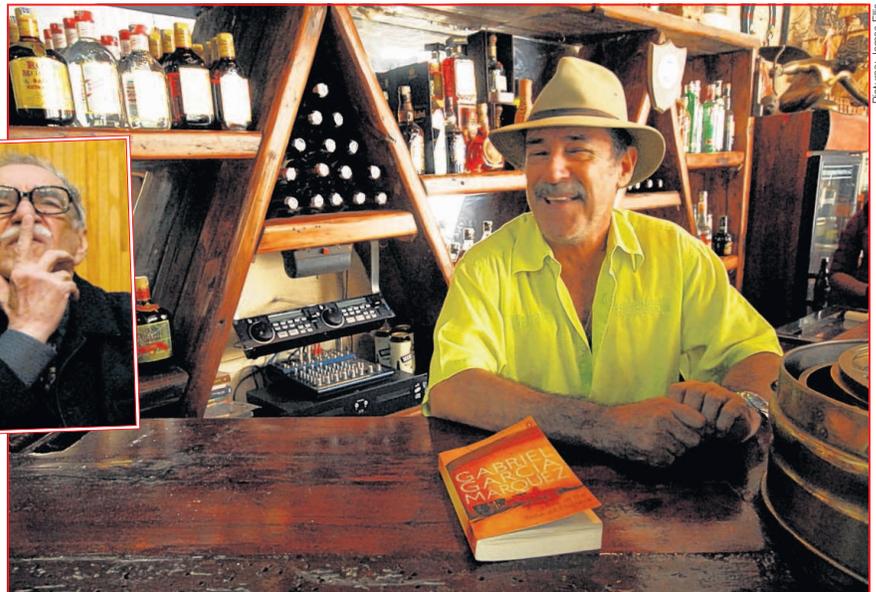


**COLOMBIA** IN THE FIRST PART OF HIS CARIBBEAN ADVENTURE, **JAMES ELLIS** TRAVELS TO THE HISTORIC CITY OF CARTAGENA

# The gift of the Gabo



Pictures: James Ellis

**BARE ESSENTIALS**

**Cartagena des Indias is a city on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Founded by the Spanish in 1533, the walled Old Town is a world heritage site and sometime home to the great Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez.**  
**Language:** Spanish  
**Currency:** £1 = 3,778 Colombia Pesos

Time Of Cholera hitting the big screens here next week, interest in his work is hotting up in a city that already swelters under the Caribbean sun.

Thankfully, Cartagena has yet to overcapitalise on this rash of enthusiasm for Gabo. So, while other famous Colombians such as pop star Shakira and footballer Carlos Valderrama have had statues made in their home towns, locals positively recoil at the suggestion something similar should be done for Márquez.

'Literature is not as popular as music or football,' admits Gustavo Tatis, Gabo expert and editor of El Universal, the paper where Márquez once worked as a journalist. 'Plus, Gabo fans don't feel they need an icon of him to celebrate their affection.'

To be honest, they hardly need one. For Cartagena is legacy enough for Márquez as he approaches the sunset of a colourful life. The city has gained almost as many epithets as the author and, within its imposing walls, built by the conquistadors in the 1700s to ward off British pirates, it's hard not to feel as though you're in a museum.

Walking the cobbled streets, the brightly painted houses have a crumbled charm brought on by salt erosion, vallenato –

Colombia's coastal folk music – blasts from parked

car windows as gathered crowds sway in time and street

vendors ply 'arepa' corn pancakes from side stalls.

Every nook and cranny seems to have inspired Gabo to write Love In The Time Of Cholera – a steamy love story that traces Florentino Ariza's obsessive

**A**lvaro Sierra scratches the smattering of salt-and-pepper whiskers on his chin, leans his head back to see from under the brim of his panama and pours a slug of whisky into a tumbler over two cubes of ice so perfectly formed they could be the world's biggest diamonds.

With a twinkle in his eye and a permanent half-cocked grin, the owner of Comarca – a treasure trove of a bar in Cartagena's Old Town – looks every inch like he's stepped from the pages of a Graham Greene novel.

'This,' he says, pointing to a bottle of Glenlivet, 'is the favourite drink of Gabriel García Márquez and we are the only bar that stocks it, so he drinks here.'

Almost everyone in Cartagena has a story to tell about Nobel Prize-winning author Márquez – or Gabo as he's known. When you get to the point where you're told stories of how his brother Jaime pees (sitting down to avoid splashes if you must know; it inspired a trait in one of Gabo's characters), it becomes almost deferential. And with Mike Newell's film adaptation of Márquez's Love In The



**MORE PLACES OF INTEREST...**

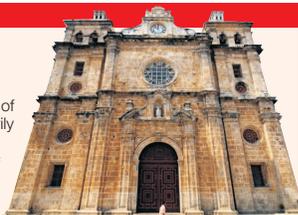
**Donde de Fidel:** Cartagena's best salsa dive and home to 'the dictator of salsa' Fidel Leottau.

**Club De Pesca:** Situated by the yacht club, this superlative fish restaurant is a Márquez favourite.

**La Cuerva:** Two hours away in Barranquilla, this bar is where the literati Grupo de Barranquilla hung

out. **Catedral de San Pedro Claver:** A church (pictured) dedicated to the patron saint of slaves that also features heavily in Gabo's work.

**Aracataca:** An hour south of Santa Marta is Gabo's birthplace. A museum is



What's the story? Bar owner Alvaro Sierra (above) and the city's favourite author, Gabriel García Márquez (inset)

passion for Fermina Daza. Parque Fernández de Madrid Real is where the star-crossed lovers would exchange notes, the Teatro Heredia appears as the film's concert venue and Plaza de los Coches is the 'arcade of scribes' where Florentino wrote poetry.

'It's like living 200 years ago,' says Simon Karl Buhler, executive chef of the city's best hotel, the Sofitel Santa Marta. 'I've lived in South America for 15 years and wouldn't live anywhere else now.'

The hotel was previously home to a convent of Clarissa nuns. Past its garden courtyard, where toucans Matteo and Claretta will swoop down for your breakfast croissants, lies the hotel's lounge bar and under it a crypt.

When the hotel was converted some years ago, the body of a young girl was discovered, inspiring Gabo to pen the character Sierva Maria De Todos Los Angeles – heroine of another of his books, Of Love And Other Demons. Like all Gabo's characters, her spirit will haunt this city for many years to come.

■ *James travelled with Journey Latin America (020 8747 8315, www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk) which has 12-night Gabo itineraries from £2,559 per person, including all flights, accommodation, transport and guides.*

*Love In The Time Of Cholera is on general release from next Friday.*

Read the second part of James's trip in Monday's TravelMetro

All prices are per room, per night, including breakfast and dinner on first night, based on a minimum 2-night stay.

SCOTLAND	FROM
Hilton Strathclyde	£60
Hilton Aberdeen Treetops	£75
Hilton Glasgow Grosvenor	£75
Hilton Craigendarroch, Royal Deeside*	£78
Hilton Dundee	£85
Hilton Glasgow	£85
Hilton Dunkeld House*	£95
Hilton Edinburgh Grosvenor	£105
Hilton Cowlumbidge, Aviemore*	£115
Hilton Edinburgh Airport	£115
Caledonian Hilton, Edinburgh	£142

IRELAND	FROM
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Hilton Templepatrick Hotel & Country Club, Belfast	£129
Hilton Dublin	£130
Hilton Belfast	£174

NORTHERN ENGLAND & ISLE OF MAN	FROM
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Hilton Newcastle Gateshead	£100
Hilton Hotel - Casino Isle of Man	£107
Hilton Leeds City	£115
Hilton Sheffield	£115
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Hilton Manchester Deansgate	£159

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