



36 Hours in Cartagena, Colombia

By Carrie Back

Cartagena is a vibrant tapestry of history and rich culture on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Spend your weekend wandering the cobble streets of the UNESCO walled city, lined with Spanish colonial architecture, and discover the country's sultry rhythms on its lively plazas.

FRIDAY

8 AM | EXPLORE THE OLD CITY

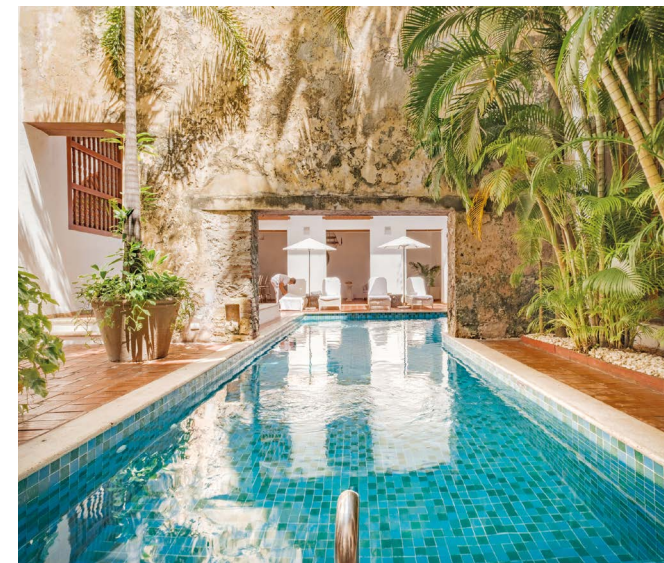
Check in at the modern and luxurious Casa San Agustín Hotel or the elegant Ananda Boutique Hotel, a restored 16th-century colonial house turned hotel within the old city's timeworn walls. One of our expert guides can help you navigate through the intricacies of this city. Start your day with a sugar fix at Portal de Los Dulces and sample the candies and pastries typical of Cartagena and Colombia's northern coast. Walk through Parque del Centenario, a small park where—if you're lucky—you might spot sloths and monkeys in the trees above on your way west to Plaza de los Coches and the city's distinctive Torre del Reloj clock tower. Visit Plaza de Santo Domingo to see the beloved Botero sculpture, *Gertrudis* (he's one of Colombia's most storied artists).

11 AM | SHOP LOCAL

Check out El Centro Artesano, which sells products made by local artisans and helps promote Colombian Indigenous communities. Grab a coffee and a light lunch or freshly baked banana bread at the quaint bookstore and café Ábaco Libros y Café. Next, stop by the photogenic Casa Abba Gallery Boutique, a mini craft market, and browse the handmade jewelry and other souvenirs. You can't miss the entrance to the gallery, an explosion of pastel hues and delicate flower garlands. Finally, finish your shopping at architectural marvel La Serrezuela, a historic bullfighting ring beautifully restored into one of the city's most upscale shopping centers.

3 PM | A TASTE OF HISTORY

Beat the heat at the Museo de Arte Moderno, a contemporary gallery showcasing regional and Latin American art housed in a 17th-century building. Surrounding the museum, you'll find Spanish-style basilicas, such as Santuario de San Pedro, working monasteries, colonial mansions, and leafy plazas,



including Parque de Bolívar. Next, stop by the Museum of Cartagena de Indias and learn the city's storied past. The museum is within the Baroque-style Palace of the Inquisition, an elegant building that hides a dark history—non-Catholics were often tortured, tried, and executed here during the Inquisition. Visit the Caribe Jewelry Museum or the Museo del Oro Zenú for silver, gold, and other pre-Colombian relics.

6 PM | ENJOY ROOFTOP VIEWS

Catch the sunset at one of Cartagena's many rooftop bars or perch on the famous walls of Las Murallas. Grab a pre-dinner cocktail at the Movich Hotel rooftop, the lively Café del Mar, or laid-back El Baluarte. Dine at Cande for refined Colombian cuisine and try *sancocho de pesados*, a traditional soup packed with local flavors. The seared tuna fillet, paired with sweet chili sauce and a banana puree, and a Barú Cocktail blended with hints of citrus, pineapple, and Tequila. Here, you'll also find a live band and dancers performing traditional Colombian dances: the Mapalé and Cumbia.

SATURDAY

8 AM | GO ISLAND HOPPING

Set sail for the white sands and glistening turquoise waters of the Rosario Islands. With over 25 islands, there's a beach to fit any mood. If you want something more wildlife focused, head to Isla Grande or the Corales del Rosario y de San Bernardo National Natural Park. Several trails explore the island's beautiful lagoons and mangroves—go on foot or rent bicycles. Many of the islands have snorkeling, kayaking, and scuba diving options. There are also plenty of relaxed beach clubs to while away the hours. We can arrange private or shared boat rides to the Rosario Islands and sunset cruises tailored to your interests, like a pick-up in a vintage car, a rum tasting, or a violinist on board.

12 PM | TAKE A NATURE ESCAPE

After lunch, included on the boat with a booked tour, head to the Aviario Nacional de Colombia, a sprawling bird sanctuary home to more than 170 species and 2,000 individual birds. Located on a peninsula south of the city, the aviary is split into three distinctive sections—the desert, the tropical jungle, and the coast—and showcases Colombia's diverse ecosystems.

5 PM | UNWIND IN THE PLAZAS

After a day in the sun and sand, unwind at one of Cartagena's excellent spas. There's a handful tucked away in the historical center, such as the highly-rated Uraku Spa. Before dinner, check out Plaza de la Trinidad, where street performers entertain crowds with traditional dances, drumming, and music in the colorful square under the Torre del Reloj, the famous clock tower.



8 PM | TASTE CARIBBEAN FLAVORS

Soak up the old-world ambiance at Carmen, an award-winning restaurant with a flair for contemporary Colombian cuisine. Try the multi-course tasting option, paired carefully with a selection of delicious wines. We can arrange a salsa experience with lessons from professional dancers with visits to some of the city's most well-regarded salsa clubs, learning about the history of each establishment. Try a class and practice your moves at the iconic Café Havana. End the night at the stylish Alquímico. Housed in a former shoe store, each of the bar's floors has a different theme: a sensory experience that takes you through the different regions of Colombia. Try the *Tomoji*, a mojito made with a blend of rums and infused with spearmint, lemon sage, lime, and soda water.





SUNDAY

8 AM | VISIT HIP GETSEMANI

Avoid the crowds in the early morning to visit the Getsemani neighborhood, known for its lively streets and small, colorful alleyways decorated with hanging umbrellas. Stop at one of the food stalls for arepa de huevos—a traditional Colombian dish that is an arepa stuffed with eggs. Or, head to local favorite La Cocina De Pepina for dishes like *cabeza de gato*. Try the tapas and homestyle dishes at Dona Lola's for something more upscale—the freshly-caught prawns served on a crab risotto are a must. Our walking tour here explores this neighborhood and ends with a fruit tasting, a ceviche workshop, or a memorable visit with two local families.

10 AM | RUM & HISTORY

Sample organic chocolate and fiery rums at El Arsenal: The Rum Box, perfectly paired with *carimañolas de queso*, a fried yuca dish infused with herbs stuffed with *costeño* cheese. Next, try your hand at a coffee roasting at Cafe del Mural. For a more exclusive experience, our local guides can take you on a private rum and chocolate tasting in the Getsemani neighborhood, where you'll learn how to make the drinks and their history. If you have time, visit Castillo de San Felipe, a whitewashed Spanish fort, then grab a light lunch at La Cevicheria before your departure.

Good to know

AVOID THE CROWDS

To get the city of Cartagena all to yourself, rise early to explore with just a few tourists joining you. The streets are nearly empty and magical at sunrise.

BRUSH UP ON YOUR SPANISH

English is widely used, but learning a bit of Spanish goes a long way. It'll come in handy for things like transportation. Always agree on the taxi price before your journey starts to avoid being overcharged.

DINNER PLANNING

Cartageneros tend to eat dinner late in the evening, usually from 8 pm–10 pm. Take a siesta or lunch later than usual to adjust to eating after sundown.

BOOK AHEAD

Eyeing that famous restaurant? Let us know so we can book you a table as early as possible. We recommend making reservations in advance, especially for special occasions.