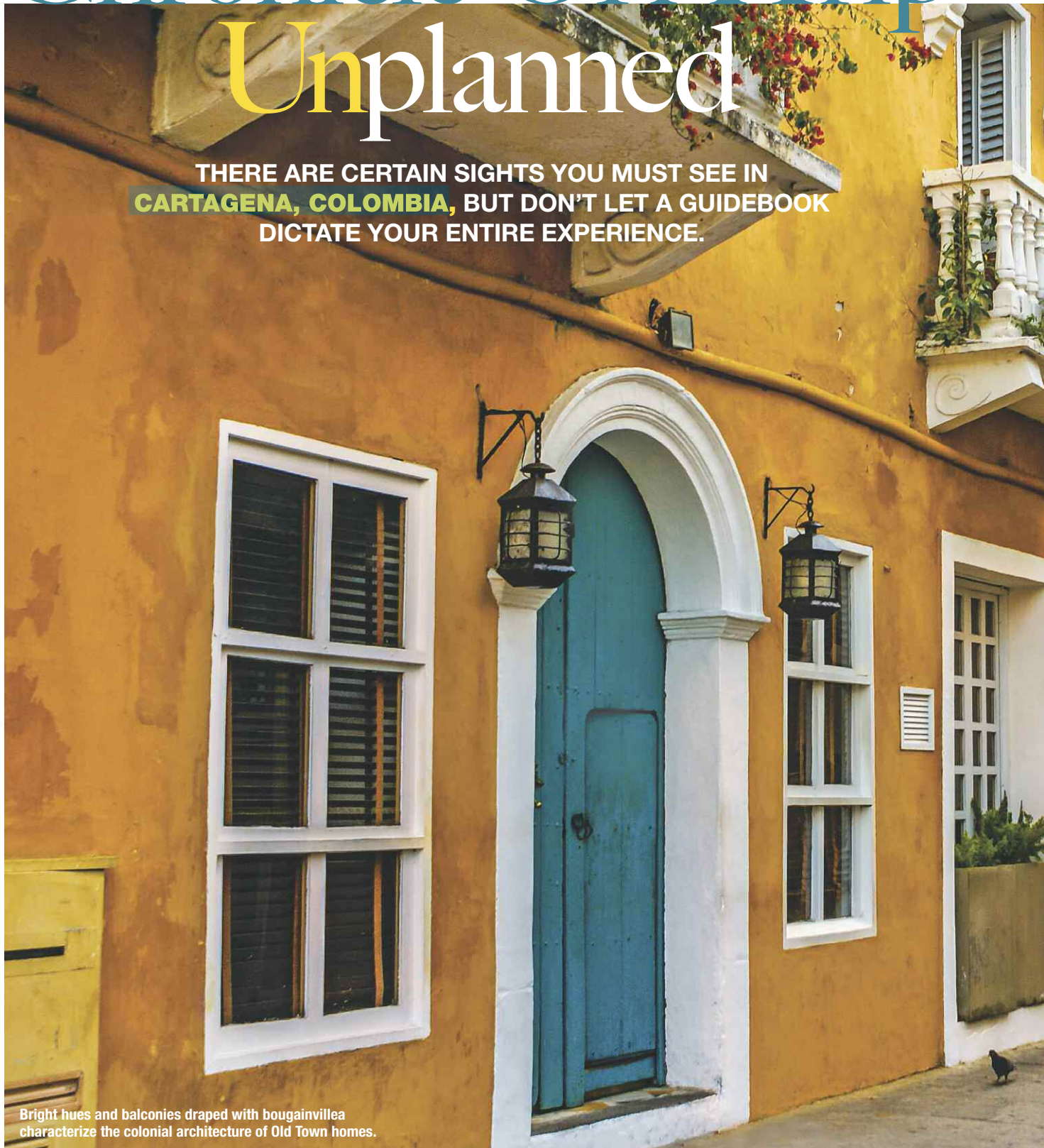


# Chronicle Of A Trip Unplanned

THERE ARE CERTAIN SIGHTS YOU MUST SEE IN **CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA**, BUT DON'T LET A GUIDEBOOK DICTATE YOUR ENTIRE EXPERIENCE.



Bright hues and balconies draped with bougainvillea characterize the colonial architecture of Old Town homes.





BY J.B. BISSELL

**Sunset** casts a noticeable calm over Cartagena's Old Town. The motorcyclists slow down and follow the rules of the road more diligently. The throngs of people shuffling to and fro on the sidewalks disperse. And many of the little cars that scurry along the narrow roadways like mice in a maze during daylight hours retreat to unseen nocturnal sanctuaries. This final detail is the most important, because at this point of the story I'm actually sitting in the street. At a rickety, unbalanced high-top table with my wife, Michelle, and a couple of cold Aguila beers.

The makeshift patio seating is courtesy of a handful of somewhat anonymous establishments — a pizza joint, a very casual steakhouse, a hole-in-the-wall bar, and a couple others — all opposite the Plaza Fernández de Madrid. We had been on our way to dinner at El Burlador de Sevilla, a popular, not-at-all-anonymous Spanish restaurant, but the sight of the tables set up on the street in this less-touristy part of town was simply too tempting to pass up. It was also made clear that by sitting at any of the tables, we'd be able to order food and drinks from *any* of the nearby eateries.

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“Oh, we have to check this out,” Michelle said.

I understand it doesn't sound like much. *Outdoor seating ... what's the big deal?* To be clear, though, the street in question is not some boulevard that's been permanently closed to traffic and transformed into a pedestrian-friendly walkway. Less than two hours before we sat down, we'd sauntered past the same spot and witnessed a taxi cut the corner so tight that the rear tire screeched against the same curb that Alfredo, a big gentleman with glasses and a penchant for horizontally striped polo shirts, has to step off to bring us another round of Aguila.

I admit that the first few times I saw headlights approaching the intersection, I girded myself, ready to grab Michelle and dive full Hollywood-style for the sidewalk. But then Alfredo sidled up to our table with a pint-size bottle of Aguardiente Antioqueño, three wide-rimmed shot glasses, and a bowl of limes. Aguardiente is regarded as the national liquor of Colombia. It's distilled from sugarcane and very light. Alfredo poured three servings, raised his glass, and said, “*Bienvenidos a Cartagena.*” I pulled out my wallet, but he stopped me. “*Gratis, amigo,*” he added.

Three things happened thanks to that spontaneous exchange: I stopped watching for headlights, we missed dinner, and, most importantly, we learned that the most rewarding way to experience Cartagena is to simply show up and see what happens.

### Open-Ended Itinerary

Cartagena was founded in 1533. In 1586, work began on the military fortifications that transformed the settlement into a Spanish colonial stronghold. Today, that area is known as Old Town. Essentially, it's made up of three neighborhoods, two of which, El Centro and San Diego, remain almost completely encircled by the original walls — Las Murallas — and blend rather seamlessly into each other. The other is the up-and-coming, bohemian Getsemaní. The entire district is on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

And there are historic highlights to be sure. The spired clock tower marks what used to be the primary entrance to the walled city. The Convent and Church of San Pedro Claver as well as the Church and Monastery of Santo Domingo are stunning. The Palacio de la Inquisición, once a palace and now a museum, offers a glimpse at the region's innovative — and sometimes brutal — beginnings. And the nearby Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas fortress is particularly fascinating.

All of these attractions should be on your formal itinerary, but so should wandering around El Centro and San Diego with no plan whatsoever, because that's when you might happen across your own Alfredo. (I've yet to see him mentioned in any guidebook.) To that end, we set out the next morning with just one item on our agenda: Get lost in Cartagena.

It didn't take long. Less than 10 minutes into our journey, Michelle stopped. “Weren't we just on Calle de la Moneda?” she asked. “Yes.”



“Did we turn a corner?”

“No.” We had crossed an intersection, but certainly hadn’t altered our path.

“Well, now we’re on Calle de la Cruz,” she said, and pointed to the sign.

Turns out, the street names change from block to block, even if you maintain your course. What’s convenient about a walled city, though, is that as long as you walk straight, you’ll eventually find a wall. Which is exactly what we did, and, like the night before, we couldn’t have planned it any better.

“This is amazing,” Michelle said. We had “navigated” to one of the end points of Las Murallas, where the wall overlooks Avenue Venezuela, the main thoroughfare into the Old Town. Even with all the historical attractions concentrated in this part of Cartagena, it’s very much a working sector of the city, so at 8:30 in the morning, the masses are commuting into El Centro and San Diego. As Michelle noted, “There are scooters and buses and taxis galore.”

So many vacation destinations are measured in terms of tranquility. Noted for providing the opportunity to escape the real world. That’s not Cartagena’s game. Here you’re thrust *into* the real world, among business people going to their offices, kids going to school, merchants pushing massive carts of fruit, and generous bartenders who keep a personal supply of aguardiente at the ready. And as Michelle said, it really can be amazing to feel a part of such a lively community, even if only for a few days.

## A Walk On The Wall

We stood atop the city wall at the northernmost corner of Old Town. Here the bulwark thickens, and we discovered an exercise group making use of the wide, flat surface — with a prime, sun-facing position — for a morning yoga session. Directly below this section is Las Bóvedas, a collection of 23 narrow chambers that over the centuries have served as military storerooms and a dungeon, and are now occupied by various souvenir shops.

“Why don’t we just stay up here and start walking,” I suggested. So we headed south, stopping for photos in front of different lookouts and with a battery of cannons that are still in place. The wall doesn’t necessarily provide a bird’s-eye view of the city, but the elevated perspective is pretty tough to beat, especially from the long segment that hugs the coastline, creating a juxtaposed spectacle of wide open Caribbean Sea in one direction and bustling urban core to the other.

When we arrived at the end of Las Murallas, it was early afternoon, and time for some food. “I definitely want to try El Burlador de Sevilla tonight,” Michelle said. “Their paella is supposed to be very good. [It is.] Let’s just have some snacks now.”

Perfect. A midday snack in Cartagena often equals street food, and I’m a big fan. Fruit sellers roam the city throughout the day. And you can’t miss them: The women wear bright colors and balance big bowls of fresh produce on their heads (top right), and the gentlemen typically push carts with all the fixings for a quick smoothie. Other vendors can usually be found where locals tend to gather: parks,



**ABOVE:** For hundreds of years, the massive stone walls surrounding Cartagena protected the city’s strategic location on the Caribbean Sea. **TOP:** Colorfully dressed vendors balance large bowls of pineapple, bananas, and exotic fruits on their heads. **FACING:** A series of whimsical metal sculptures populates the plaza in front of the Church of San Pedro Claver.

## Lose Yourself in Cartagena

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transportation hubs, and outside major stores.

I stood in line for grilled *chorizo* sausage on a stick and a cheese empanada while Michelle walked across the way and bought a fruit salad with bananas, pineapples, and about three other varieties we could neither recognize nor pronounce.

Food in hand, we started to mosey back through the heart of El Centro. Similar to the French Quarter in New Orleans, there's no block here that's not worth seeing at least once. Sure, they might not all have shops or attractions, but the architecture and ambiance alone is worth the walk. We made a point to occasionally change course — a left here, another left up there, then a right — in ways we knew weren't the "correct" direction, but we wanted to see as much as possible.

One moment we were marveling at a stretch of colonial buildings so bright, they seemed to have been painted their respective reds and blues and yellows just yesterday, and the next we were deep in a quiet residential district where green and pink bougainvillea climbed the houses' white walls.

### Magical Reality

According to local lore, Gabriel García Márquez penned at least a portion of his *Love in the Time of Cholera* while sitting at some of

the same rickety tables Michelle and I discovered our first evening in town. Who knows. I'm a Márquez fan though, so I tend to believe it, just like I believe in the magical happenings of his novels and short stories. To call Cartagena itself magical is cliché at this point. Still, while I won't claim to have seen any ghosts or levitating maidens or old men with enormous wings during our week in town, I won't say any of that would have surprised me either.

After sunset on our final night, we headed toward Plaza Fernández de Madrid and the nameless restaurants and bar adjacent to it. Michelle wanted a pizza; I was in the mood for a steak. And we were both thirsty for an *Aguila*. (If you must know, we visited this specific stretch of sidewalk at least once every day.) But when we arrived, there was a car parked where "our" table should have been. We were heartbroken. Alfredo waved hello, and then recognized the problem. "*Un momento*," he said, and proceeded to the corner.

"Is he really doing what I think he's doing?" I said to Michelle.

A shrill whistle, followed by a rush of Spanish chatter, split the calm evening for a few seconds before a young man came jogging across the street. He nodded to us, and then pulled away in his car.

"Yes, he is," Michelle said, eyebrows raised watching the scene unfold.

Alfredo lifted our table out to the street and pulled up two chairs. The hallmark of Márquez's best writing is that, to his characters, the most extraordinary events that take place in the story are as normal as any other everyday occurrence. After Alfredo put our table down, he looked at us as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened — and then he poured a round of *aguardiente*. It might not have been magic per se, but in all my years of traveling, I've yet to experience many moments more magical than that one. ■

## fastFACTS

### RESORT DIRECTORY:

[IntervalWorld.com](http://IntervalWorld.com)

### CLIMATE:

Cartagena's position on the Caribbean coast means consistently warm weather. Daytime temperatures typically range from 82°F to 86°F.

### CURRENCY:

Colombian peso

### DON'T MISS:

An evening ride through Old Town in a horse-drawn carriage.

### TIPPING:

At many popular restaurants, 10% is included

with the bill. Give a little extra for good service. When it's not automatically included, leaving the change — or 10% — is very much appreciated.

### INTERVAL TRAVEL:

[IntervalWorld.com](http://IntervalWorld.com)

### RENTAL CAR:

Unnecessary unless you want to explore beyond the city on your own.

Taxis are plentiful.

### VISITOR INFORMATION:

Cartagena Tourism Board

57.5.6550211

[cartagena.deindias.travel](http://cartagena.deindias.travel)

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