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7 NIGHTS IN CAPTIVATING CARTAGENA

SO ROMANTIC IS CARTAGENA, Colombia, that many fashionable stores there sell only white clothes, for spur-of-the-moment nuptials. Enclosed within thick fortress walls, the city is a fascinating mosaic comprising shaded plazas, bougainvillea-festooned mansions, and centuries-old cathedrals and castles. Ancient she may be, but the newly restored city hums with a hip and youthful spirit, and tourists are flocking to sample trendy restaurants and stylish boutique hotels hidden behind antique facades. Couples will want to spend at least a week here to see the city sights and enjoy a few days at the luscious Caribbean beaches nearby.

GET THERE

Avianca flies direct from Miami or via Bogotá from Fort Lauderdale; Los Angeles; New York; and Washington D.C. 800-284-2622; avianca.com

STAY THERE

\$ Anandá Hotel Boutique offers 24 gorgeous suites in a former colonial mansion in the middle of the city. From \$110 in low season (\$316 high). 575-664-4452; preferredboutique.com

\$\$ Guests staying in **Hotel Agua Barú's** bungalows enjoy views of **Corales del Rosario National Park** and the use of a boat to visit it. From \$299 in low season (\$402 high), including breakfast; 575-664-9479; hotelagua.com.co

\$\$\$ Hotel Santa Clara is a 16th-century monastery-turned-inn with 119 elegant rooms offering garden, city and sea views. From \$330 year-round; 575-650-4700; sofitel.com

For More Info
cartagenatravel.com

GET BUSY The intimate **Anandá Hotel Boutique** makes a great base, with 21 chic and comfortable rooms and suites in the heart of the walled city. The old quarter is laid out in a rough grid stitched together by a series of sun-washed plazas; to get your bearings, board a horse-drawn carriage for a guided tour.

Leafy **Plaza de Bolívar** is a great place to cozy up on a bench and observe the diverse parade of colorful characters; have some small bills handy to tip the *palenqueras* — the Afro-Caribbean women clad in traditional garb and carrying baskets of fruit on their heads — who'll happily pose for photos. Art lovers will enjoy the **Museo de Arte Moderno**; **Museo del Oro**, a gleam with pre-Columbian gold; and **Plaza Santo Domingo**, with its voluptuous reclining nude statue by famous native artist Fernando Botero. After you've soaked up the city's colonial charm, hire a taxi and head to the picturesque village of La Boquilla, where two can become one

with nature on a tandem canoe trip in a lagoon teeming with birds. At nearby **Volcán de Lodo el Totumo**, enjoy good, clean fun in a "volcano" as you float together in a pool of warm, mineral-rich mud. Get a mud massage from one of the local "therapists," then rinse each other off in the adjacent lake.

WINING & DINING Cartagena's restaurant scene has a dizzying array of exciting Caribbean fusion cuisine: Try mofongo (mashed plantains) and *langostinos* (red shrimp) in passion-fruit sauce at candlelit **Juan del Mar** on Plaza San Diego. For the ultimate romantic meal, dine in **Fuerte San Sebastián del Pastelillo** at Club de Pesca, an intimate eatery lit by tiki lamps; couples can canoodle at a private table in a cannon embrasure that overhangs the harbor.

After dinner, Cartagena's gregarious citizenry really kicks it up a notch. Get the party started aboard a *chiva*, a party bus with live music and rum. Then head to **Avenida Pedro Heredia**, where nightclubs swing to the sensual strains of vallenato, the folk music of the region.

THE BEACH EXCURSION Succumb to the siren song of the exquisite and unspoiled **Corales del Rosario National Park**, a 40-minute taxi ride southwest of the city. (Boats also depart daily from the Muelle de los Pegasos dock.) Chances are you'll be tempted to spend the night at **Hotel Agua Barú** on Playa Blanca, where trendy suites with balconies overlook the turquoise sea. Take the hotel's private boat to nearby Islas del Rosario, where you can snorkel the reefs and sun yourselves on white sands. — CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER

Opposite, clockwise from above left: boulevarding in Old Town; dining in Plaza Santo Domingo; a touch of the Caribbean; Quadrifoglio, a hip boutique hotel with solid colonial bones.

