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## COLOMBIA

Cartagena &amp; San Andres Island

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Cartagena! What a FANTASTIC place it is - if only the heat and the humidity would abate a bit. I went through two sets of clothes daily. The humidity is so high that even the small restaurant sugar packets were plastic lined. The old town of Cartagena, with its narrow streets and bright multicolored houses draped with balconies and grilled windows, exudes a quaint colonial atmosphere. The elaborately designed door knockers could knock your socks off when you checked out the prices of those available in antique shops. Various shades of bougainvillea streamed from the balconies of most of the row homes. Horse and carriage (fiakers or fiacres) drivers were constantly plying the streets and doing a lively business, especially by night. Street vendors, young and old, male and female, were hawking and promoting every conceivable item, but mostly tropical fruits like bananas, mangos, papayas, limes and grapefruits. These were being sold from their hand pushed carts which they constantly moved from street to street. Fried foods like tortillas and empanadas were favorite sidewalk offerings. Young men with thermoses of coffee to sell by the cup to passersby, shoe shine men carrying their trade on their back, lottery ticket and candy sellers, etc. were all part of the street scene seen everywhere. Either due to the culture or due to a rough and tumble past the shops and residences have bolted doors and the windows are trimmed or secured with either iron or wooden grills. There were no beggars. However, the ever present pigeons and lazy street dogs were quite visible.

Cheap bracelets and necklaces, woven bags and street artist paintings were laid out on the sidewalks to entice buyers, wherever tourists seemed to congregate. Speaking of tourists, when it came to Americans, Canadians or Europeans there were few to be seen. Most visitors we met were from South America.

We were invited to an artist's reception (a Cartagenian, Jorge Yances, who now lives in Tennessee) for his exhibition currently showing in the Palace of the Inquisition. He paints within the framework of magic realism a la Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende and his paintings were rife with symbolism. One evening we attended a fringe theatre venue held in one of the niches of the massive stone fortified wall surrounding the city. It was Euripides' "Electra". With my fragmented Spanish it was quite difficult to follow, especially since it was a bare bones production with almost nothing in stage props other than face masks. Thus one was forced to rely almost exclusively on the spoken word. In general, I was surprised at how little English was spoken or understood by the overall populace.

The Museum of Gold offered a variety of artifacts from the early indigenous cultures, including fish hooks made of pure gold. Would a fish snagged by such a handsome hook be considered lucky or unlucky? In the Palacio de la Inquisición there was yet another exhibition of a contemporary Colombian artist, Rafael Dussan, which had one very unique piece of artwork. It consisted of about 80 tea bags, each of which had sketch drawings done on both sides of the nearly transparent bags. These were stretched out on a thin wire line to create a composition of movement. Fascinating and clever! The Museum of Modern Art had mostly pieces from the 1950's and 60's and, with few exceptions, done by Colombian artists. Intriguing were the toilet doors of the museum which were marked with artistic depictions of a male and a female nude. The church of San Pedro Claver (St. Peter of the Keys) had magnificent stained glass windows and an ossuary directly behind the church which is still being used. A city tour took us through the thoroughly modern new city which contrasts sharply with the old town. A climb to the top of the former military fort overlooking the city was worth the effort and while there I even meandered aimlessly in the vast tunnel complex built within the fort's walls. Cartagena is known for a unique sculpture created by Hector Piñeres. It is called "Zapatos Viejos" (Old Shoes) and based on a line from a poem by Don Luis López titled "a mi Ciudad Natal". It has become quite the tourist attraction. The world famous Colombian artist, Fernando Botero, has one of his "fat" sculptures called "Gertrudis" placed in a popular square in the old town. This piece has become the icon of the city.

Our boutique hotel, Casa La Fe (formerly a brothel, so we were told by the current owner), was most pleasant but stifling hot in the enclosed, high walled, open courtyard which offered no breezes. Courtyards were the lifeline of the colonial architecture of the city and were elaborately designed. Today they contain lots of plants, water fountains, garden variety crockery and patio furniture and they are still the focal point for social gatherings. With their massive open grilled doors, one could easily peek into these magnificent outdoor living areas of the compounds. As we were walking past one such home with

its traditional tiled roof, the charm suddenly disappeared because my wife was dotted with rust red paint. A laborer on a ladder was painting the tile edges and splashed her thoroughly. Luck was with us in that it was just around the corner from our hotel and the paint was water based. A quick wash of the blouse removed all the spots.

On the island of San Andres I rented an oversized golf cart and whizzed around the entire island at the break neck speed of 20 kph. Traffic on the island consisted of mainly scooters and a few local busses. Since traffic is not problematic, one could stop anywhere along the paved road. We did so frequently to enjoy the outstandingly picturesque seascape views. At Morgan's cave we were given a brief history of the coconut, but no free handouts, and enjoyed a performance of traditional island dances. The cave itself was just a cavern opening which was nondescript and even tacky in that pirate models were placed within the cave and also at its entranceway. Another scenic attraction on the island were the blow holes. However, these only operate when there are heavy swells. We were there when the sea was as smooth as rippled glass. Goodbye blow holes! Most of the locals live adjacent to the road and their homes are dotted and clustered amongst walled in mansions and exclusive properties. It is definitely a coexisting "two sides of the coin" society. Although street names are mostly in English, the lingua franca is Spanish. There are some beautiful beaches which were filled with resident bathers and tourist sun worshippers. This small island has a rather large Islamic center. I learned that most of the shopkeepers, hotel and property owners are of Middle Eastern origin. To serve the native inhabitants, there are Roman Catholic, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist and Baptist churches scattered throughout the island. There is also a small Jewish community. The air strip on San Andres is quite short and completely crosses the width of the island. One side is tropical forest and the other side is lined with corrugated tin roof shacks and shanties. What a contrast! On the grass beside the landing strip white herons by the dozen were pecking away, seemingly oblivious to the landing and departing planes.

We also took a speed boat to one of the Rosario Islands, the Isla del Encanto (which has been designated a national park), to spend the day swimming and lounging in an eco-friendly atmosphere. It was so eco-oriented that there weren't even any changing facilities and the shower was a single pipe offering a faucet style stream of water. With barely a breeze on this cloudless day on the island, I managed to get decently burned.

The most unusual meal I ordered was grilled salmon served in a watermelon sauce. A specialty drink of the country is a smoothie called "limonada de coco" which sometimes was so sour my mouth puckered up with every sip. Mojarra is a tropical fish which is ugly as sin, but tasty. One could drink the water or use ice without concern in Cartagena and the off shore islands. At a supermarket in Cartagena I had to show my sales receipt to a security guard posted at the exit. He then initialed the slip before I could leave the store. That indicates a concern about shoplifting, I suspect.

Colombians really like Americans and I was astounded at how many of them had family connections with the States. I felt quite secure and safe walking about the streets, even at night. Once in the country, stereotyped and preconceived fears quickly dissipated.

A popular cowboy style hat worn by many Colombians is made of cane leaves woven into various black and white geometric designs. These range in price, depending on quality, from \$50 - \$250 dollars. Though I like traditional headgear, I passed on that buying opportunity.

Three pieces of Colombian pottery somehow found their way into my hand luggage and made it home safely. NO! They are not Pre-Colombian, merely replicas, and thus very legal. But they were given the thrice over when going through Colombian customs. All my meticulously wrapped items were completely dismantled and checked thoroughly to ascertain modern provenance. Those Indian cultures of the Sierra Nevada Santa Marta region do a marvelous job of copying ancient relics. In all fairness, the customs officials rewrapped all the pieces equally as carefully as I had.

The current tourist advertising campaign in Colombia uses the following slogan: "The only risk in Colombia is the risk of wanting to stay." I wholeheartedly agree!