

# *Cartagena the Beautiful...A Walking Tour of the Old City*

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

From the moment you sail through the Boca Grande channel and spy the stately blue Madonna standing serenely in middle of the harbor, you can tell you've arrived somewhere special. The cityscape looms in the early dawn, a misty blend of cathedral spires and high rises. Welcome to Cartagena!



Club Náutico office, clubhouse and restaurant

Anchored off Club Náutico, we could scarcely wait to get to shore and begin our explorations. Lee Miles' *Destination Cartagena*, available at the marinas, provides a good map and basic orientation to the city. Cartagena is a city that beckons you to explore her, walk her walls and feel her culture. We chose an early Sunday morning when there was little pedestrian or vehicular traffic, light was good for photography and, most importantly, the temperature was cool.

From either marina, Club Náutico or Club de Pesca, a 10-minute walk across the Puente Román puts you inside the outer walls. Once over the bridge and through the open portal, a sharp left allows a pleasant stroll along the bay on Calle del Arsenal. Parks line the bay side and several restaurants and shops line the opposite side of this brick-paved street. Following the street past the Convention Center, we come upon our first glimpse of the fine artwork judiciously placed throughout Cartagena. *Los Pegasos*, two huge bronzes of a winged horse family, a richly detailed rearing stallion and mare with foal, are located at

the head of the bay.

Puerta del Reloj (Clock Tower Gate) is just across the street. One of the three spires dominating the city's horizon, its yellow tower is integral to the massive city walls and guards the main entrance to La Ciudad Amurallada (Walled City), also called Centro Historico or just Centro. Passing through its wide, shadowy portals, there are vendors selling cigarettes, candy, books and the ubiquitous lottery tickets. Once inside the wall, you arrive in Plaza de los Coches (Carriage Square), former site of the slave market, now a wide-open plaza with horse-drawn carriages lined up to whisk tourists around the city streets.

As you walk to the left, there are several places to access the city walls via ramps and stairs. We opted to walk the walls first, take photos from several vantage points and then backtrack to specific streets, plazas and points of interest. Begun in 1586, the walls succumbed to the forces of nature and were rebuilt numerous times, finally completed as a fortification some 200 years later. Wide and high, in some places as much as 20 feet high and 50 feet wide, there are canon placements and sentry boxes strategically placed. We watched a soccer game going on below, a Tai Chi class on the top and two lovers snuggling close in one of the small nooks in the wall.



Beautiful city walls of Cartagena afford long leisurely walks.

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We walked for miles it seemed (a total of about four around the city's perimeter), awed by the breathtaking views of Boca Grande and the azure blue Caribbean on one side and the tightly packed, historical city on the other. As we strolled, we noted those areas that would require closer investigation like Plaza de San Pedro, the Cathedral, Teatro Heredia and the Santa Clara Hotel.

Located under the northern section of the walls, the graceful arches of Las Bóvedas (The Vaults) teem with activity. Used in the past for munitions storage as well as prison cells, the area is now occupied by souvenir shops and vendors. As the walls curve south and then east, the magnificent Castillo de San Felipe comes into view high on the hill overlooking the city, an enormous Colombian flag flying proudly above its ramparts. We overheard one cruiser comment, "I've seen the Pyramids of Egypt, but they didn't impress me as much as this!" Photo opportunities are excellent from the wall, providing an unobscured panoramic view. With your eye on the castle, you could almost miss Circo Teatro, a now abandoned, dilapidated theater-in-the-round also used decades ago for bullfights.

Vivero, the WalMart of Cartagena, appears suddenly and the walking portion of the walls end abruptly, but not before catching sight of "India Catalina", a most graceful Indian maiden sculpture by Elation Gil. Located in a small roundabout just outside the walls, she stands proudly on tiptoes gazing up at the castle. A smaller gilded version of this statue is equivalent to "Oscar" and is awarded for film excellence in Colombia.

Though not part of the walled city, a visit to San Felipe is a must. Walking southeast over the bridge past "India Catalina", the castle becomes more immense with every step. Take a right at the foot of the hill and a short walk brings you to the entrance. Admission is nominal and after a steep

climb to the top, you can enjoy outstanding 360° views of the city and its environs below. Living history emanates from every stone and I swear you can feel the steps of the thousands who have passed this way before you. Duck into tunnels and feel your way down darkened stairways or sit in the shadow of the ramparts and sip cool water while trying to imagine the labor and materials expended in the building of this massive fortification.



Massive Castillo de San Felipe overlooks the old city with the graceful India Catalina in the foreground.

Back down to sea level, take a little side trip a couple of blocks south of the castle to see "Zapatos Viejos", two huge bronze work shoes erected as a monument to a local poet who wrote a sonnet to "Old Shoes". There are several vendors here selling souvenirs, but the best surprise was a man with a three-toed sloth who offered us a chance to hold this complacent, cuddly little critter.

Head back into the city across the bridge, Puente Heredia, along Calle de La Media Luna. Shops, restaurants and businesses of all types line this avenue until it passes Parque del Centenario (Centennial Park), the city's largest park, easily identified by its eight ornately arched entrance porticos. Straight ahead, the Clock Tower Gate admits re-entry to the city. This time as you pass

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through Plaza de los Coches, enjoy the sweet offerings of the vendors here in the area known as “Portal de los dulces”.

Practically everywhere you walk, there is something to see and experience. As you wander down narrow brick-paved streets, dozens of balconies are overflowing with vibrant flowering plants trailing down the walls. Colorfully dressed women, balancing fruit baskets on their heads, sing out their offerings, “Aguacates, mandarinós, patillas y piñas” and donkeys slowly pull carts filled with everything and anything. Spanish colonial architecture adorned with intricate wrought ironwork lines every alley and passageway. Thick, heavy wooden, oversized doors with decorative bronze doorknockers shield charming courtyards beyond.



Magnificent bronze statues, “Los Pegasus”, are located at the head of the dock.

Each plaza in the city has a draw of its own. The beautiful Plaza de San Pedro with the San Pedro de Claver church at its heart, boasts a huge statue of the saint, as well as an incongruous collection of scrap iron sculptures, appropriately named “Las Chattaras” (scrap iron). The Museum of Modern Art (Museo del Arte Moderno) is also located here as is a host of artisans and vendors. San Pedro, a fine restaurant just opposite the church, is a great place to stop for a bite or a refreshing iced coffee.

Plaza de Santo Domingo was our personal favorite for lively street color and sheer energy in motion. One entire side of this large plaza is bounded by the beautiful Santo Domingo Church. The nude bronze figure of “Gertrudis”, quite ample in her proportions, lies in splendor at one corner. The center of the square offers open-air seating for several restaurants. The local cruising guide mentions, “walking the gauntlet of street vendors” and this is no exaggeration. Every possible item for sale is offered here...cigars, t-shirts, sunglasses (name brands only), paintings, hats, emeralds, bead and coconut shell jewelry and hair ornaments. It’s nearly overwhelming at times, but part of the experience. No one is rude, just persistent. Mariachi bands stroll from table to table. An old man wanders through with an ancient Victrola on his shoulder and one 78rpm record he can play for you. Another man offers you a small live turtle from his boxed cache. Good boat pet? I think not.

Just off the plaza, Calle de la Factoria beckons those interested in looking (and buying) world-class emeralds at discounted prices. This street is lined with window after window displaying “green ice” and hawkers on the curb try to lure you in to hear their special “promotion just for you”.

The requisite tribute to Simon Bolivar is found at Parque de Bolivar, a beautiful park with shade trees and benches surrounding the statue of the hero on horseback. Sip an icy cold, fresh “limonada”, rest and watch the world go by. The park is surrounded on one side by Palacio de Inquisición (closed for renovation while we were there) and opposite are several upscale shops and the Museo del Oro (free admission with English placards explaining the exhibits), displaying a fascinating collection of pre-Colombian Sinú gold jewelry and artifacts.

The ornate dome of the 16<sup>th</sup> century La Catedral comes into sight as soon as you round the corner.



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Though under renovation, regular Masses are still held here and, for a nominal fee, local multi-lingual guides offer tours of the cathedral as well as its underground catacombs.

Plaza San Diego is a nice spot to end the day. A park surrounded by the School of Fine Arts, antique shops and restaurants and the exquisite Santa Clara Hotel, formerly a Clarist convent. Visit the Santa Clara, for a drink or a Sunday brunch, and enjoy the tranquil atmosphere of their lush, verdant courtyard enveloped in the centuries old convent walls.

A day or two will only serve to whet your appetite for more exploration. Admittedly, we have only skimmed the surface of what the old city holds in store. Cabs are cheap here, but walking is safe and allows the opportunity to take it all in and savor the rich flavor of the place. Without reservation, we can say that Cartagena is the most beautiful and fascinating city we have visited in our four years of cruising and it's all within walking distance.



*An old city street with a view of the ornate dome of La Catedral*