

November 17, 2003

We certainly enjoyed our month in Cartagena, Colombia. We visited many of Cartagena's historical and cultural sites, enjoyed an evening at the theater, ate at many of its restaurants, and watched some of the festivities during the November Independence Day celebrations.

While in Cartagena we anchored off of Club Nautico, the cruisers' marina. Club Nautico, located in the middle class neighborhood of Manga, was about 2 miles from the "old" city of Cartagena. As there was quite a large cruising community in Cartagena during our stay, we spent many hours socializing. In all, there were about 70 cruising boats in Cartagena while we were there with 25 boats anchored out, another 35 boats med moored at Club Nautico, and about 10 boats moored at Club de Pesca, another marina near Club Nautico



Club Nautico Anchorage

Cartagena was founded in 1533 and named Cartagena de Indias (Cartagena of the Indies) to differentiate it from the Cartagena in Spain. During much of the 17th and 18th centuries, the city flourished as one of Spain's principal ports in the New World. It was during this period that Cartagena was in its heyday. Thick impenetrable walls and impressive bastions surrounded the elegant city, and more fortresses were built outside the city to protect it and the harbor from outside invaders and pirates. As the city and the harbor were well protected, the majority of Spain's Fleet of Galleons gathered in Cartagena Bay awaiting to take all the treasures accumulated by the Spanish Crown in its southern colonies of New Granada and Peru back to Spain by way of Cuba. During this time Cartagena was also Spain's major slave market in the southern continent. Today much of the Spanish-colonial architecture has been restored in "old" Cartagena, most of the thick walls and bastions surrounding this old city still stand, and many of the old fortresses have been restored.



Old and New Cartagena



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We spent quite a few days and evenings enjoying “old” Cartagena, more commonly known today as the Walled City or El Centro. It was quite beautiful with its Spanish colonial architecture, plazas, narrow streets, and striking sculptures. In the evening the old city became quite magical and beautiful with its many towers lit. Often in the late afternoon and evening horse-drawn carriages could be seen traveling the old streets. Many enjoyable evenings were spent eating at some of the restaurants in the old city, many with exquisite ambiance and cuisine.



Main Gate Old Walled City

Unfortunately, an event did occur our first few days in Cartagena that affected our visit. We had let our guard down as we were walking up on the wall our first afternoon in the Walled City. Mary trailed behind Phil when a man sneaked up behind her and wrestled her for her purse. Because of his strength, he grabbed the purse almost immediately. Mary pursued him screaming for help at the top of her lungs. As the purse-snatcher had to get off the wall using the only available staircase, he suddenly dropped the purse in front of a few employees at a local restaurant before fleeing. We can only imagine that people must have been running up the staircase at the same time and he felt trapped. Since Mary had fallen and scraped her knee while chasing the man, the restaurant employee sat her down while he cleaned the wound. Later at a bookstore, Mary’s wound was cleaned again just to make sure there was no infection. It was as if all the people of Cartagena had felt personally assaulted by this man’s action and wanted to help make it right. It was a great ending to what could have been a horrible memory. Plus, it was wonderful to have the purse back as our camera was inside.



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As Cartagena was rich in Spanish colonial history, it made for many interesting explorations. It was exciting to see firsthand the extensive fortification system created by the Spanish over the 300 years to keep out its enemies and the pirates. We visited the Naval Museum (Museo Naval del Caribe) which showed the progression of the fortresses over the years as engineering and firearm technology improved. We visited the San Felipe de Barajas Fortress (Castillo San Felipe) where tunnels were created like a maze so as to confuse the enemy while Spanish soldiers lay in wait among the many side alcoves, ready to ambush if needed. We took a boat ride out to the Bocachica forts of San Fernando and San Jose that protected the main channel into Cartagena. When touring these two forts it was interesting to see how the chain used by the Spanish to stop ships from entering the harbor was kept just below the water surface as the tide fluctuated. The San Fernando Fort also provided insight into how the soldiers lived.



Besides the forts, we also visited the Augustine convent (El Convento de la Popa), the Gold Museum (Museo do Oro), and Saint Pedro Claver's Monastery and Church. El Convento de la Popa, situated on top of the highest hill overlooking the city, offered a spectacular panoramic view of the entire Cartagena area. The Gold Museum displayed an interesting overview of the Zenu society (pre-Hispanic) with their amazing flood control system, weaving, and beautiful gold ornaments. Saint Pedro Claver's Monastery and Church offered a glimpse into the life of this amazing priest who was called the "Apostle of the Blacks." He took one of the first steps to help liberate the slaves in Cartagena.



Augustine Convent

Original Slave Trade Plaza



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One of our highlights during our stay was our evening attending the Colombian Folclorico Dancers of Sincelejo at the beautiful Heredia Theater. The history of Colombia was presented through dance numbers from pre-Hispanic to present day showing the progression throughout the years of the three ethnic groups comprising Colombia: the Indians, the Spanish, and the Blacks. Cartagena today is a mixture of these groups. Afterwards seven of us cruisers enjoyed a lovely late night meal sitting outside in the beautiful San Pedro Claver Plaza amongst all the lit towers.

While in Cartagena, local elections were held the weekend of October 25 and 26. For the day prior to the election and the two days of the election no alcohol could be served in restaurants and bars. Also, Halloween, an American influence, was observed.

To be in Cartagena during the Independence Day Celebrations was definitely interesting. As this was their only big festive celebration of the year, it was almost a carnival atmosphere. The actual date of Colombia's independence from Spain was November 11, 1811. Cartagena's festivities started much earlier as it was host each year to the Miss Colombia Beauty Pageant, and because of this dual role many of Cartagena's independence festivities intertwined with that of the beauty pageant. The twenty-two beauty contestants from each of the different states in Colombia arrived November 1 and the crowning of Miss Colombia took place November 17. The festivities peaked from November 11 to November 17 when almost the entire city was on holiday. Fireworks could often be heard throughout this period.

We attended the main "national" parade on November 13 that displayed the beauty contestants and dancers from each of their particular states. The short parade route was thick with people, almost 300,000. Unless one was near the front, one had almost no chance of actually viewing the parade and so many resorted to a "different" type of fun. Luckily we were up in the stands, and observing the mass of humanity below was entertainment in itself. We had heard about the different parade traditions that had grown over the years, but one needed to see it to believe it. And, one definitely needed to be in a particular party atmosphere to enjoy. We were told not to wear good clothes. Basically flour was thrown at times, drinking water from small plastic bags was squirted, and people brought paint made from carpenter's chalk and water to try to paint each other, naturally all in fun. As local beer and rum companies sponsored the parade, beer and rum were easily purchased during the parade. When one tried to cross the bridges to enter the "old" city, boys painted in black (representing the slave era) blocked one's path asking for money. If one said he had no money or gave them a coin instead, one passed unpainted.



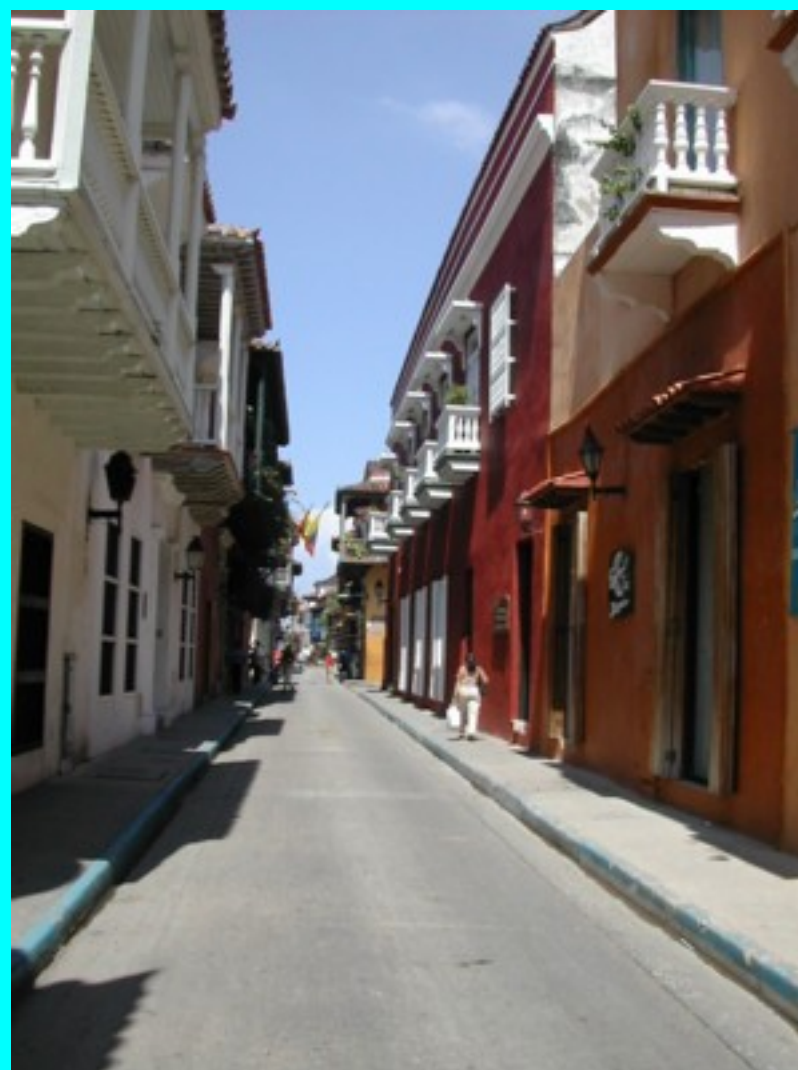
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Friday, November 14, the “boat parade” took place. Twenty-two whaling boats, one for each of the beauty contestants, maneuvered the two-mile course with oarsmen providing the power. Of interest was the almost 300 boats that came out to watch the event, party, and have fun throwing water at each other with the Colombian fireboats getting into the act besides. The morning of the event the local boats at Club Nautico could be seen getting their water bag ammunition together.

Saturday, November 15, the narrow streets of the “old” city were closed off and a charity event was held which involved well-known racecar drivers driving go-carts along the narrow streets of old Cartagena. We watched the event on TV, as tickets were \$100.

Our month in Cartagena had been interesting and special, but now it was time to sail the boat to St. Pete Beach, Florida. Sunday, November 16, we prepared the boat for sea. Our plan was to leave early November 17. Late Sunday afternoon we had an electrical fire onboard the boat when the relay to the stop solenoid switch for the engine shorted. Luckily we caught it immediately and no damage was done. Phil spent the evening putting in a new switch to bypass the damaged one so that our engine could once more be turned off easily. Because of the fire, we pushed off from Cartagena on the 17th a little later than originally planned.



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