

# Love in the time of

# Cartagena

JONATHAN CANE SERENADES THE  
CAPITAL OF COLOMBIA



This spread, clockwise from bottom left: Copenhagen's DR Byen Concert Hall; Edith & Ella Spring/Summer 2013 collection at Copenhagen Fashion Week 2013; a doorway in Copenhagen.



Encircled by gargantuan walls for its protection, it is now safe not (only) from brutal invasions but the overdevelopment of the New City's sleazy beachfront condos and marauding tourists. Walls that once welcomed cargo ships carrying slaves and flour now make for a charming place to watch

I am obsessed with book dedications. Having a book dedicated to you seems to be one of the highest personal achievements – to be The Reason for a book, or at least The One to whom it is given. Poet laureate Maya Angelou dedicated her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to her son: 'Guy Johnson, and all the Strong Black Birds of Promise / Who Defy the Odds and Gods / and Sing Their Songs'. Boris Pasternak dedicated his famous epic *Doctor Zhivago* to Olga Ivinskaya, his lover, who was arrested by the Soviets in an attempt to discourage him from finishing the book. She languished in a Gulag where their baby died. When she was released, she published *A Prisoner of Time*, which she dedicated to Pasternak: 'The greater part of my conscious life has been devoted to you – and what is left of it will also be devoted to you.' Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, which her son described as 'the longest and most charming love-letter in literature' was scandalously dedicated to Victoria Sackville-West, her lesbian lover.

Gabriel García Márquez dedicated *Love in the Time of Cholera*, his novel set in Cartagena, to his wife of 50 years. I think Márquez's dedication is the most romantic of all dedications – 'To

perhaps the most romantic city in the world – Cartagena de Indias. Sitting on the Colombian Caribbean coast, it is an ancient city of romance and literature, now rediscovered and restored. In Cartagena, streets are festooned with white, patterned flags that cast shadows like poems on the cobbled ground, and open onto squares where wicked inquisitors once burned witches and heretics. Artisanal ice-lolly stores sell fancy popsicles displayed like jewellery and jewellery stores sell sapphires displayed like birds. This is the place Márquez described as a city of 'amethyst afternoons and nights of antic breezes'.

I know how to write about the things I don't like. I'm good at being mean-spirited, and funny enough that people forgive me. But writing now about Cartagena, I'm at a bit of a loss, because I really love the city: it is beautiful, romantic and surprising. My vocabulary is low on superlatives, so, avoiding the thesaurus, I might use the word 'beautiful' too many times. It's a terrible quandary: what is a cynic to do when he falls in love?

For well over 500 years the Old City of Cartagena has been the desired jewel of jealous princes and powerful empires.

Mercedes, of course' – it could not have been for anyone else, because it was for Mercedes, of course. It is appropriate then that the most romantic dedication should have been written in

the sunset and drink cocktails at the famous Café Del Mar. Cartagena's architecture is beautiful indeed. Republican palaces, imposing stone churches, secret enclosed courtyards, all however built on the blood of vassals and heretics. One of the most beautiful buildings worth visiting is the Inquisition Palace. Built in 1770, the Grand Palace was the seat of cruel and fastidious inquisitors appointed by King Philip III for the '*Tribunal de Penas del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición*'. If you visit the contemporary museum in the Palace, you will see all manner of gory accoutrements, including scales used to weigh witches who were burned for being over- or underweight. The Palace opens onto a terribly pretty park, formerly known as Plaza de Inquisición, now called Plaza de Bolívar. A statue of Simón Bolívar in the centre commemorates the general's role in liberating Colombia. The plaza is a lovely place to sit and rest, read, hold hands or drink coffee.

There are many other museums and galleries to visit, and in January the famous Hay Festival of Literature and the International Music Festival attract many international culture vultures. You can even take a drippy horse carriage ride around town, if that's your thing. I often opted rather to lie by the hotel pool. Cartagena is unspeakably and wonderfully hot, and all good hotels in the Old City have two pools – one inside a cloistered courtyard and another on the roof terrace with a view of the city and the Caribbean Sea. The internal cloisters





The Copenhagen Opera House. Copen hagen's in Copen hagen.

are particularly beautiful because each building meets up with the stone walls of its ancient neighbours, revealing centuries of rebuilding, layered like an archaeological record. The best hotels and apartments in the Old City are intelligent renovations of palaces and convents and are as a rule very tasteful and stylish. If you'd like to stay in the very expensive Old City, you generally have two options: an apartment or a hotel. Overlooking Plaza de Bolívar are the Casa Pombo apartments. Previously a colonial mansion built in the 16th century and recently restored by architect Álvaro Barrera, they integrate the original wall paintings and marble. Super-slick interior decoration makes for a charming rental option. A number of excellent alternatives are available for rent on Airbnb.com. There are many boutique/design hotels from which to choose. The trendy Tcherassi Hotel has a stylish vertical garden alongside the inner pool, while the rooftop terrace pool has great views and exposed stonework. This hotel is uber-cool and is the creation of fashion designer Silvia Tcherassi. Casa Pestagua and Casa San Agustín are less trendy hotels. Both are classic-style renovations, and maybe less suitable for the young.

Santa Clara Sofitel hotel was the Santa Clara Convent before, and is the setting for Gabriel García Márquez's *Of Love and Other Demons*, in which a young girl, Sierva María de Todos los Ángeles, after being bitten by a rabid dog, goes mad and is sent to Santa Clara to have the demons exorcised. Márquez worked for only a few years in Cartagena during the 1950s but the city made a deep impression on the Nobel laureate. 'I always bring back an incident from Cartagena, a place in Cartagena, a character in Cartagena,' he wrote.

When I was not wandering the love-struck streets eating gelato, I took respite in the air-conditioned El

## ICE CREAM, SA-STYLE

*To tide you over until you can board a plane for Cartagena yourself, try these top local ice-cream outlets*

**THE CREAMERY, CAPE TOWN** SOLD AT CAPE TOWN'S FOOD MARKETS AND MADE FROM PREDOMINANTLY NATURALLY GROWN FRUIT, ORGANIC CHOCOLATE, EGGS AND MILK FROM ANIMALS THAT LIVE OUTDOORS, YOU CAN GET IT BY THE SCOOP, IN A CONE OR A CUP, OR IN 200ML, 500ML OR 1 LITRE CONTAINERS. ORDER ONLINE AND COLLECT. **021-447-7690, THECREAMERY.CO.ZA**

**SINFUL, CAMPS BAY, CAPE TOWN** BUCKETS OF RICH CHOCOLATE AND STRAWBERRY SWIRLS OR 'OUT OF AFRICA' (KOEKSISTERS AND AMARULA) OR WHITE CHOCOLATE AND POPPY SEED – ALL IRRESTISTIBLE. **021-438-3541**

**BAGLIOS CAFFE, NELSON MANDELA SQUARE, SANDTON, JO'BURG** A HAND-CRAFTED ITALIAN ICE CREAM PRODUCED IN SA ACCORDING TO THE BARBAGLIA FAMILY'S RECIPES, USING ONLY THE FINEST QUALITY INGREDIENTS. AVAILABLE THROUGHOUT SA. **BAGLIOS.CO.ZA**

**CI GUSTA, FLORIDA ROAD, DURBAN** THE FIRST CI GUSTA STORE TO OPEN IN SA, IT OFFERS PARFAITS, GELATO, ICE CREAM, FROZEN SORBET AND DESSERTS OF ALL KINDS. **031-303-7297**

**HÅGEN-DAZS, JAN SMUTS AVENUE, JO'BURG** NO ARTIFICIAL ADDITIVES, STABILIZERS, EMULSIFIERS OR COLOURS, AND BECAUSE IT CONTAINS LESS AIR, THE ICE CREAM IS FLAVOUR-RICH. OUTLETS THROUGHOUT SA. **011-325-6891**



The Copenhagen Opera House. Copen hagen's in Copen hagen.

Ábaco Libros bookstore and café. Not only do they have every Gabriel García Márquez novel ever published, a good selection of English books and free WiFi, but they also serve pretty good coffee. Amazingly, a good espresso is hard to come by in Colombia and you will mostly need to get your fix at Juan Valdez Café, the Starbucks of Latin America.

The good restaurants in Cartagena, though, are too numerous to mention. You can eat everything from Peruvian *ceviche* to pizza and traditional Colombian food to all manner of remixed Colombian cuisine. For lunch we favoured quiche or pastries at the trendy French patisserie Café Mila, or the daily lunch menu at the reasonably priced locals' lunch spot La Mulata. If you have a sweet tooth, you can gorge on Colombian pastries from local bakeries on every corner or cool down with artisanal ice-lollies from La Paletteria or home-made gelato from Gelateria Paradiso. The street food is pretty good too. Street vendors can be overenthusiastic, but the men who fry corn cakes stuffed with cheese in butter should not be avoided. Colombia has many peculiar (and sometimes terrifying) fruits sold by brightly adorned ladies or old men in the plazas, but the fruit is cheap and perfect for a breakfast on foot. Highly recommended is a snack of green mangoes with lime and salt on the island beach Playa Blanca. It's a one-hour boat ride to white-sand and blue-blue water. Or spend a night at the exclusive Hotel San Pedro de Majagua on the Corales del Rosario Islands.

We ended our vacation with a trip to Parque Tayrona, which is a short plane trip or a six-hour shuttle ride away. The park hides some of the world's most coveted beaches inside dense tropical forests. To get to Tayrona you can fly or bus to Santa Marta, from which you can trek on foot or take a one-hour boat ride. We took the boat and arrived on the heartbreakingly beautiful El Cabo San Juan Beach, drenched and concerned about our wet iPads and Kindles. The trek is extreme, but it's worth finding beaches where you can spend morning till night sunbathing, drinking beer and reading Márquez. You can either sleep in a cheap hammock pretty much on El Cabo Beach or stay at Ecohabs Tayrona's exclusive bungalows on Cañaveral Beach. We slept on the beach and I awoke on our last morning in a hammock with the sun rising over the Caribbean Sea, full of optimism and unfamiliar warm-tingly feelings. I found myself cuddling a dream, long ago shelved, as cynics tend to do, that one day I would wake up next to Someone, and a bedside table with a book on it dedicated 'To Jonathan, of course'. **mc**