

BOKANA TRAVEL

COLOMBIA

TRAVEL GUIDE 2026

CARTAGENA

A walled city made for walking, a protected coral sea an hour away by boat and, close by, the first free African town in the Americas.

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THE ESSENTIALS

WALLS, ISLANDS AND THE MEMORY OF PALENQUE

Cartagena de Indias has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984 for its port, its fortifications and its monumental core. About 11 km (7 mi) of walls ring the historic center, and the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas watches over the city from its hill. Next door, Getsemaní tells another story: it was home to the Lanceros, the lancers who drove the city's independence on November 11, 1811. Today it's the liveliest part of town for an evening walk.

Just offshore lies Corales del Rosario y de San Bernardo National Natural Park, a protected marine area for snorkeling, diving and beach days with clear rules. About an hour away by road, San Basilio de Palenque was founded in the early 17th century by people who escaped slavery. UNESCO recognizes its cultural space as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and Palenquero, the town's own language, is still spoken there.

WHERE IT IS

Colombia's Caribbean coast; capital of the Bolívar department.

GETTING THERE

Nonstop from Bogotá in about 1 h 25 min to 1 h 30 min; from Medellín, around 1 h 15 min.

WEATHER

Hot year-round: highs of 31–32 °C (88–90 °F), lows of 24–26 °C (75–79 °F) and humidity near 80%. Dry December to April; rainy May to November, peaking in October.

DOCUMENTS

Original Colombian ID (cédula) for residents; passport for foreign visitors. You need it for the flight and to board boats to the islands. Minors need their own ID.

MONEY

Colombian peso (COP). Hotels and restaurants take cards; bring cash for the pier, the islands, street vendors and tips. Pay in pesos, not dollars.

LANGUAGE

Spanish. In San Basilio de Palenque, people also speak Palenquero, a Spanish-based creole with Bantu features.

TIME ZONE

Colombia time (UTC-5).

PLUGS

Types A and B, 120 V, 60 Hz. Colombian chargers work as usual.

DON'T MISS

HIGHLIGHTS

01
THE WALLED CITY AT SUNSET

Walk the historic center and climb onto the walls as the sun goes down. Plazas, balconies and bastions make up the ensemble UNESCO listed as a World Heritage Site in 1984.

02
CASTILLO DE SAN FELIPE DE BARAJAS

One of the largest Spanish fortresses in the Americas, with tunnels designed so defenders could hear the enemy coming. Open daily, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.; go early to beat the heat.

03
GETSEMANÍ AFTER DARK

The neighborhood of the 1811 Lanceros mixes colorful houses, street art and everyday local life. A graffiti walking tour led by a local guide helps you read its past and its present.

04
ROSARIO ISLANDS

Inside Corales del Rosario y de San Bernardo National Natural Park: snorkeling, diving and beach time. Depart only from La Bodeguita pier, with a licensed operator.

05
BARÚ AND PLAYA BLANCA

Barú and its Playa Blanca rank among Cartagena's main beaches. Go on a weekday: over a single 2026 holiday weekend, more than 6,500 passengers left from La Bodeguita.

06
SAN BASILIO DE PALENQUE

About an hour by road, the first free African town in the Americas. UNESCO proclaimed its cultural space in 2005. Visit with community guides and listen to its music and its language.





PLAN YOUR TRIP

WHEN TO GO

The dry season runs December to April: rain is rare and the breeze takes the edge off the heat, ideal for the walls and the islands. December, January and Holy Week (Semana Santa) are high season, with bigger crowds and higher rates. May to November brings short downpours, more frequent in September, October and November. The Atlantic hurricane season runs June to November, so check the forecast before heading out to the islands.

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC

BEST

DEC – APR

The best time to go.

GOOD

MAY – JUL

A good time, with a catch on weather or crowds.

RAINY

AUG – NOV

More rain: keep plans flexible.

WHAT YOU NEED TO TRAVEL

For Colombian travelers: your cédula (national ID) is all you need, but an island day comes with separate fees: the National Park entry fee and the La Bodeguita pier fee. Traveling on another passport? Requirements differ, so message us and we'll check yours.

- Original Colombian ID (cédula) for residents; passport for foreign visitors. You need it for the flight and to register before your boat leaves. Minors need their own ID.
- 2026 entry fee for Corales del Rosario y de San Bernardo National Natural Park: COP 13,500 in the Rosario sector and COP 11,000 in the San Bernardo sector (Resolution 551 of 2025, a 3% increase). It doesn't include transportation, a guide or a beach day pass (pasadía).
- Visitor assistance and accident insurance: Resolution 273 of 2024 requires it to enter the protected area, and National Parks announced it would apply from January 2026 (approved insurers: Positiva and Zurich). It's paid separately from the entry fee.
- Pier fee at La Bodeguita, the only authorized departure point in Cartagena for tourist boats to the islands. Pay at the ticket window before boarding; bring cash.
- Book only with authorized operators; 62 companies are licensed to run trips to the islands from La Bodeguita. Wear your life jacket for the entire ride.
- Inside the park, it's forbidden to touch, step on or anchor over coral, take shells or starfish, bring in single-use plastics, or eat threatened species such as grouper (mero), sea turtle or queen conch (caracol pala).
- Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, 2025–2026: COP 33,000 for Colombians with a cédula and COP 38,000 full price; free for Colombians over 62 and on the last Sunday of each month, except January and December.

Checked in September 2026 with National Natural Parks of Colombia: Corales del Rosario y de San Bernardo National Natural Park. Rules change, so confirm with the official source before you travel, or message us and we'll help.

WHAT WE'D TELL A FRIEND

BOKANA TIPS

1 Head out early

Boats to the park leave between 8 and 10 a.m., and the return depends on the Port Authority (Capitanía) and sea conditions. Eat breakfast first and get to the pier with time to pay the fees.

2 Photos with palenqueras

Palenqueras, the fruit sellers from Palenque, earn their living on the street. Ask before you raise your camera and agree on the price before the photo: it's their work and helps support their families. Buying their fruit is another good way to support them.

3 Walk in the cool hours

With highs of 31–32 °C (88–90 °F) and high humidity, save the historic center and the castle for early morning or late afternoon. Wear linen or cotton and a cap, and always carry water.

4 Agree on taxi fares

Tourist distances are short and taxis are practical, but agree on or confirm the fare before you get in to avoid being overcharged.

5 Cash for island day

The pier fee, park entry, beach lunch and tips are usually paid in cash. Carry small bills in a dry bag.

6 Reef-friendly sun protection

Use biodegradable sunscreen or, better yet, a rash guard. Fewer chemicals in the water help the park's reefs.

7 Palenque with a local guide

Going with community guides keeps your money in town and helps you understand what you see: the kuagro (the town's age-based social groups), the lumbalú (funeral rites) and the language. If you can, time your visit with the Drum Festival in October.

TRAVEL MINDFULLY

In Corales del Rosario park, don't touch or step on coral, don't take shells or starfish, and don't order grouper, sea turtle or queen conch. With the palenqueras, ask first and pay the agreed price for every photo.

WHERE TO EAT

OUR RESTAURANT PICKS

Chosen for their food, their track record and what past diners say. Price: $ budget · $$ mid-range · $$$ splurge.

CELELE $$$

Contemporary Colombian Caribbean · Getsemaní (Cartagena)

★ **4.6** · 936 reviews on TripAdvisor

The city's most awarded table: the team researches ingredients and recipes from Colombian Caribbean communities and turns them into a multi-course tasting menu.

What diners love: Reviewers praise the creativity, the local ingredients and servers who explain every dish. Some find the portions small and the wine expensive.

Order: The full tasting menu

Book ahead and confirm the location: it was under renovation in 2026.

LA COCINA DE PEPINA $$

Traditional Caribbean and Córdoba-style · Getsemaní, Calle Larga (Cartagena)

★ **4.5** · 1,466 reviews on TripAdvisor

A simple Getsemaní spot that has served home-style coastal cooking for years: a good, no-frills starting point for the region's flavors.

What diners love: Reviewers single out well-cooked fish, coconut rice, patacones (fried green plantain) and warm, friendly staff. It's small and fills up.

Order: Catch of the day with coconut rice

No reservations: arrive early for lunch or dinner.

RESTAURANTE CANDÉ $$$

Cartagena cooking with Afro-Caribbean roots · San Diego, Historic Center (Cartagena)

★ **4.6** · 4,873 reviews on TripAdvisor

Devoted entirely to Cartagena cooking and its African and Arab heritage, in a San Diego house with live music and dance.

What diners love: Diners rave about the seafood, the crab claws and the posta cartagenera, plus the festive mood. Expect long waits in high season.

Order: Posta cartagenera (beef slow-cooked in a dark, sweet sauce) with coconut rice

Book for dinner; there are dance performances during service.

LA CEVICHERÍA $$

Ceviche and seafood · San Diego, Historic Center (Cartagena)

★ **4.2** · 4,778 reviews on TripAdvisor

A Centro classic for ceviche and fresh seafood, with outdoor tables on Calle Stuart in San Diego.

What diners love: Reviewers love the fresh fish, the citrusy ceviches and the paella. Several say prices are high for the size of the place.

Order: Fish ceviche or crab claws

Street vendors approach the outdoor tables; inside is calmer.

RESTAURANTE ESPÍRITU SANTO $

Corrientazo costeño (coastal set lunch) · Historic Center (Cartagena)

★ **4.5** · 3,961 reviews on Google Maps

A popular lunch spot right in the Centro: a big, cheap daily set menu with fish, coconut rice and homemade soups.

What diners love: Diners value the generous portions, good prices and fast service. It's noisy, and there's often a line at midday.

Order: Fried fish with coconut rice

Lunch only (roughly 11:40 a.m. to 3:40 p.m.).

LA OLLA CARTAGENERA $$

Cartagena cooking with an Arab touch · Bocagrande, Av. San Martín (Cartagena)

★ **4.3** · 2,445 reviews on Google Maps

Open since 1978, it's a traditional pick in Bocagrande for fish and seafood in coconut sauce, close to the hotels.

What diners love: People like the coconut rice, the red snapper, the prawns in sauce and the service. Some find prices high for what you get.

Order: Red snapper in coconut sauce with shrimp

Ratings and review counts checked in October 2026; they change over time. Review summaries are our own. Hours and prices vary, so check before

LOCAL FLAVORS

WHAT TO EAT

AREPA DE HUEVO

A fried classic of Colombia's Caribbean coast: a corn arepa is fried, split open, filled with a raw egg and fried again. A street breakfast.

PALENQUERAS' FRUIT

Cut mango, watermelon and pineapple, sold by palenqueras for centuries: a tradition of African origin in Cartagena's kitchen.

ARROZ CON CHIPI CHIPI

Rice with chipi chipi, a tiny Caribbean clam. It's one of the traditional dishes recommended by Colombia's official tourism guide.

PORK LOIN IN TAMARIND SAUCE

A sweet-and-sour pairing typical of the coast, found in traditional Cartagena cooking.



BOKANA TRAVEL

PICTURE YOURSELF IN CARTAGENA? LET'S PLAN IT TOGETHER.

Join one of our groups on your own, or bring your people on a private trip. Scan the code or message us.

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SOURCES

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