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Cartagena de Indias: Latin America's New Convention Capital?

Having hosted the sixth Summit of the Americas in 2012, Colombia's Caribbean crown jewel is primed for major meetings growth in 2013 and beyond.

By Matt Alderton
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Upon arriving at Rafael Núñez International Airport, first-time visitors to Colombia might expect a welcome committee of guerillas, drug lords and beauty queens. What they'll find, instead, is a diverse country that is not only safe, but also thoroughly — if not surprisingly — modern. A far cry from the Colombia of the 1970s and '80s, it's a new nation, and it demands that stereotypes, like luggage, shift in flight.

As the country's front door, the coastal city of Cartagena de Indias exemplifies perfectly the new Colombia. So much so that it was the site of the Sixth Summit of the Americas in April 2012, hosting 34 heads of state — including President Barack Obama, the first-ever U.S. president to stay overnight in Colombia — and 8,000 of their aides. Here, European and Caribbean influences mingle in the foreground of a South American backdrop, at once charmingly historic and vibrantly cosmopolitan — an ideal destination for groups, which are coming in growing numbers.

"The Americas Summit proved our [viability as a destination for meetings, incentives and events]," says Francisco Vergara Piñeres, executive director of the [Cartagena de Indias Convention & Visitors Bureau](#). "We still need to work stronger on the perception of Colombia, [but we're working hard to get] people here to experience the reality."

Getting There

After the heat, thick and sudden, the first thing you'll notice in Cartagena de Indias is construction dust, as the airport is in the midst of a \$57 million modernization and expansion project that will increase its capacity from approximately 2.1 million passengers in 2010 to 4 million in 2020, part of which is an enlarged terminal opening this year. For a country that is investing so actively in renovations — of both its image and its infrastructure — it's a fitting first impression.

"We find ourselves in a time of growth, in which we continue to work as a team to make the airport an engine for tourism development and competitiveness in Cartagena," says Maria Claudia Gedeón, financial and commercial manager of the Society of Caribbean Airports (SACSA), which has operated the airport since 1996.

Cartagena likewise is expanding its airlift: Currently, Rafael Núñez is home to 12 airlines flying to eight national and four international destinations, including Miami and Fort Lauderdale aboard Avianca and Spirit Airlines, and New York aboard JetBlue, which commenced service to Cartagena in November 2012. According to Piñeres, American Airlines also is interested in flying to Cartagena, but is "waiting to see how JetBlue does."

"One of the best options [for increasing travel to Colombia]," he says, "is to have an international airport for the Caribbean [with more direct flights]."

Colonial Conventions

With so few direct flights, getting to Cartagena from the United States remains a challenge. For groups willing to endure a brief layover, however, the rewards outshine the inconvenience.

Undoubtedly, one of those rewards is Cartagena's historical fabric, the center of which is its 500-year-old colonial walled city. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984, it dates back to the 16th century, when the Spanish surrounded Cartagena de Indias — "de Indias" to distinguish it from the Spanish city for which it's named — with protective walls and forts made of lime and coral stone. Today, much of the walls remain. Instead of keeping invaders out, however, they keep history in. For groups, the result is a magical time capsule of nontraditional meeting venues set against historic architecture and narrow cobblestone streets, including colonial homes, ornate cathedrals, former monasteries, and stately theaters, not to mention 16 public squares that are available for private events of up to 800 people.

"You can touch the history of Cartagena, and that makes Cartagena special," explains Piñeres, who says the walled city's small, compact size makes it ideal for groups that want to minimize transportation needs.

Indeed, the walled city is home to numerous attractions — for example, gold, emerald, art and naval museums that double as event venues; a Gabriel Garcia Marquez-themed walking tour; and romantic horse-drawn carriage rides — and dozens of hotels, including the 119-room Sofitel Santa Clara and the 91-room Hotel Charleston Santa Teresa (both former convents), plus a smattering of boutique properties, such as the 32-room Movich Hotel Cartagena de Indias, which promises incredible views from its rooftop terrace. Along with scores of shops and restaurants — where menus include local specialties like fresh seafood, coconut rice, coconut limeade and "arepas con juevos" (fried corncakes with eggs) — all are convenient to the privately managed [Cartagena de Indias Convention Center](#), which has spent \$5 million on upgrades since 2010.

Beyond the Walls

Groups will find just as many options outside the walled city as in, ranging from cruises aboard a private catamaran to excursions to the Rosario Islands, a beachy archipelago that's an hour away by boat.

For more history, look east to Castillo San Felipe de Barajas, a hilled fortress that dates back to the 16th century. The largest such fortress in the Americas, it's open to tours during the day and by night is available for outdoor events of up to 500 people.

A short drive in the opposite direction is a skyline of Miami-esque skyscrapers that locals call "the modern city," the highlight of which is a waterfront area known as Bocagrande. Sandwiched between Cartagena Bay on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other, it's home to a picturesque seawalk and a wealth of shops, restaurants, and nightclubs, not to mention some of the area's largest hotels, including the 280-room InterContinental Cartagena and the Sheraton Cartagena — both opening in 2013 — plus the 278-room Cartagena Marriott Hotel and the 250-room Hyatt Regency Cartagena, opening in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Further north, along the Caribbean coast in La Boquilla, is another wave of new hotel development. Here, an oceanfront hospitality district includes the 530-room Las Américas Resort and Convention Center, which completed a new guest room tower in 2011 and a 2,600-square-foot convention center expansion in 2012; the 140-room Holiday Inn Cartagena Morros, which opened in 2011; the 118-room Sonesta Hotel Cartagena, which opened in 2012; and the 233-room Radisson Cartagena Ocean Pavilion Hotel, opening this spring.

"In the next three years we'll be adding 3,000 more rooms," Piñeres says of Cartagena's hotel inventory, which currently includes approximately 5,000 guest rooms in 72 hotels.

Taken with the old history inside the walled city, the new offerings are proof that Cartagena is as diverse and well-rounded a destination as it is a safe one.

Just ask the president: "Thanks to ... the people of Colombia and Cartagena for your unbelievable hospitality," Obama said following the Summit of the Americas. "This is a beautiful city. And I'm going to do my best to bring Michelle and the girls back to come visit."

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