



MUSICAL DESTINATIONS

CARTAGENA

Jeremy Pound braves the sun, sea, Saint-Saëns and salsa to witness classical music history taking place at this colonial jewel on Colombia's Caribbean coast

THE PLACE

Tell someone that you're going to a music festival in Colombia, and you can expect the response that you're very brave. Or possibly mad. And rightly so, but only if 'brave' means sauntering in the warm Caribbean sunshine along cobbled streets of brightly painted houses, stopping now and then to admire a Spanish colonial church, take a closer look at some finely woven handicrafts or pop into the shade of a bougainvillea-clad bar for a beer... This is Cartagena de Indias, a far cry from the cocaine-bedecked world of paramilitaries, kidnappings and violent crime that we all too readily associate with this country.

Situated on Colombia's northern coast, Cartagena, a UNESCO world heritage site, is

one of South America's most beautiful cities. Founded in the 16th century, it was once a major port for exporting gold and jewels to Spain – the huge walls that still line the coast are the legacy of the struggle against attack after attack by pirates, not least the much reviled Sir Francis Drake. Today, Cartagena has stretched well beyond those walls and its population has grown to over a million people. Its central old town, however, remains gloriously unchanged, a place where Caribbean and Mediterranean cultures combine in a wealth of colour.

Pirates are no longer a problem, of course, and less so too, it seems, are the paramilitaries. Since coming to power in 2002, president Alvaro Uribe has made it his priority to reclaim his country's cities from the stranglehold of



the drugs trade. His methods have been tough, controversial even, but effective. As the war on cocaine is driven back into the forests, the likes of Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and Cartagena have been able to lead a 'normal' life again. Now,

In the old town, Caribbean and Mediterranean cultures meet in a wealth of colour

it's just a case of convincing the outside world that this no longer a no-go country. Under the *Colombia es pasión!* slogan, huge investments are being made to welcome visitors. Colombia, says the message, is on the up. Certainly, Cartagena itself feels very safe.

THE MUSIC

January 2007 saw the inaugural Cartagena International Music Festival take place, a first for modern-day Colombia. Under the direction of conductor Charles Wadsworth, musicians of the calibre of pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, the St Laurence String Quartet and I Musici de Montréal brought the likes of Saint-Saëns, Beethoven and Mendelssohn to the lively Teatro Heredia and the roomy acoustics of the 17th-century Santo Toribio

MUSICAL CONNECTIONS IGNATIUS SANCHO

Cartagena may not have produced many noted classical musicians of its own, but it did at least play some part in the remarkable story of Ignatius Sancho. Born in a slave ship when his parents were being transported across the Atlantic from Africa to South America in 1729, Sancho's mother died soon after they arrived in Cartagena and his father, rather than live life in slavery, committed suicide. Fortuitously for young Ignatius, his stay in South America was brief, and he was soon taken back across



SLAVE TO SOCIETY: Ignatius Sancho rose from humble means

the Atlantic, this time to Britain.

Initially given to three sisters from Greenwich, he taught himself to read and write before running away to the Duke of Montagu, who had been encouraging him in his scholarly endeavours. Taken on as a butler by the Montagu family, he wrote a couple of plays, a *Theory of Music*, and had a number of songs and instrumental works for violin, harpsichord, mandolin and flute published. Establishing himself in British artistic society, he became friends with the actor Garrick and had his portrait painted by Thomas Gainsborough.

A DAY IN... CARTAGENA



SERENE: the Convento Santacruz de la Popa

MORNING

Take a trip out into the Caribbean Sea in a speedboat. The high-octane, wave-leaping ride is great fun, and sun worshippers may then want to make day trip of it by stopping off and rolling out the towel at the Playa Blanca on the Isla de Barú.

AFTERNOON

For a more sedate pleasure, head up to the 17th-century Convento Santacruz de la Popa (above) on a hill overlooking the city. Here, you'll find a beautiful gold-adorned chapel, a serene bougainvillea-bedecked courtyard and the best views of Cartagena to be had.

EVENING

Cartagena doesn't shut up shop at 5pm, so take an evening stroll through the old town. The temperature is still pleasantly warm and the streets resound with fellow strollers, street musicians and the clippety-clop of open horse-drawn carts. There's no shortage of decent bars, either.

EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY...
THREE TASTES OF CARTAGENA

EAT: The coconut is king here, and finds its way into all aspects of the local cuisine. Try, for instance, freshly caught fried red snapper served on a bed of coconut rice.

DRINK: Colombians drink aguardiente, an aniseed-tasting liqueur that should be taken neat. Too many of these, and you'll find yourself next morning in need of several cups of Colombia's pride and joy – coffee!

BE MERRY: Head off to a club and salsa the night away. Compared to the sensuous latino moves of the slinky-hipped locals, you'll probably look as supple as a post, but after a bit of encouragement and a few aguardientes, you'll soon feel the part.



CARTAGENA NIGHTS: a free late evening concert at the Plaza de San Pedro Claver attracts a huge crowd



COLONIAL GEM: the Iglesia de San Pedro Claver

Church and Chapel Santa Clara. 'For me, it was a dream that people who have never heard classical music in this context in their country, will be able to know just what it is,' festival founder Julia Salvi, the Colombian wife of Victor, the renowned Italian harpist, tells me. The aim of her new venture, she adds, was not just to put on a good show, but to spearhead a drive to bring music to people throughout the country – in between concerts, the festival musicians also conducted masterclasses.

With every event a sell-out, the festival proved a big success. Admittedly, the opening few bars of most concerts tended to be heard by just a fraction of the audience, as Cartagenan concert-going tactics seem to

involve staying in the bar right until the first chord is struck and then, and only then, making one's way to one's seat. When they did eventually make it in, though, the attentiveness was immaculate, the applause at the end rapturous. And when two free late-night concerts were staged in the splendid Plaza de San Pedro Claver, over 2,000 people gathered around to listen: moving stuff.

Sensibly, a similar format and line-up of artists are planned for 2008. In the longer term, though, with its unique setting, there is real potential for Cartagena to develop into a festival of some international note. At just three hours flying time from Miami, it's an obvious destination for US music-lovers, while, for Europeans, there's the prospect of escaping that post-Christmas hump with a week of Caribbean sun. Perhaps now, though, is the time to go, while the city is still charmingly light on tourists. And, besides, you can still kid people that you're 'brave' for going there... ■

GETTING THERE

The Fundación Victor Salvi Colombia runs festival packages, that include hotels, meals and concert tickets (www.cartagenamusicfestival.com). Avianca (www.avianca.com) flies directly from Miami to Cartagena several times a week.