

Cartagena: Love in the Time of Cholera

The streets that provided the setting for the film of Gabriel García Márquez's epic novel, 'Love in the Time of Cholera', work their magic on James Bedding.

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Photo: Digital Railroad

News of the city's wealth spread around the world, and one day a fleet of 100 ships carrying 8,000 soldiers and 12,000 sailors came to attack it. The defenders numbered just 3,000 men, led by a sailor called Blas de Lezo who had one eye, one arm and one leg, but they fought valiantly. After a bloody siege lasting 56 days, the attackers gave up and sailed home.

Soon after, the city erected a mighty new fort: the biggest that the Spanish ever built in the New World. At its foot the residents erected a statue of Blas – fatally injured in the attack – his single eye fixed on the horizon for ever.

This story could be one of the colourful anecdotes dreamed up by the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, but it comes straight out of the history books. The city it concerns, however, is easily the star of a new film, released in Britain next Friday, of one of his best-loved books: *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

It tells the story of one Florentino Ariza who, rejected by his young sweetheart Fermina Diaz in favour of another man, waits for more than half a century for an opportunity to win her heart again. In the meantime, Ariza (played as an adult by Javier Bardem, who recently won an Oscar for his role in *No Country for Old Men*) lives a "vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love" – in his own unique way.

García Márquez never actually names the setting for his story, but his "city of the Viceroy" is a close match for Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The

novelist knows the city well: he wrote about it as a young reporter, and still keeps a house there.

Whatever viewers make of the film's attempt to capture the magic of the novel, many will be inspired by shots of Cartagena to visit it for themselves. Although more than four decades of armed conflict have put much of Colombia out of bounds, Cartagena is considered safe, and in recent years many former colonial mansions, monasteries and convents have been converted into hotels to cater for the growing number of visitors to this Unesco World Heritage Site.

Founded in 1533, the city soon became the depot in which gold and silver looted from all over the New World was stored before being shipped back to Spain in convoy. After many attacks by pirates – and the siege in 1741 by the British Admiral Sir Edward Vernon, with his 100 ships – the fortifications took on the form they have today.

You glimpse them early in the film, as the young Florentino, a telegraph operator, raises flags atop the battlements to announce the arrival of ships carrying mail. For visitors, a stroll around the walls makes a good introduction to Cartagena: on one side, the churches, plazas and colonial mansions; on the other, a swathe of grass between the walls and the beach, where children play football and, where, when I visited, part of a political rally was given over to a kite-flying contest.

The walls are massive: up to 40 feet high, and 60 feet thick. At the Santa Catalina Fortifications Museum you can climb into them, descending into a vaulted cistern, hot and humid as a Turkish bath, which once gathered rainwater for drinking. From the displays I learnt that a privateer such as Francis Drake – who raided the city in 1586 – could earn more for himself from the capture of one Spanish ship than the English Crown took in annual income.

As for the "archaeological material uncovered during restoration works", housed in a glass cabinet, the collection could have been dreamt up by García Márquez: some rusty nails, a cigarette packet and an asthma inhaler. The pirates, and their spiritual heirs, did not leave much for posterity.

The walls did, however, preserve the city. In the novel, García Márquez describes a time when the "great old families [had] sunk into their ruined palaces in silence. Along the rough cobbled streets that had served so well in surprise attacks and buccaneer landings, weeds hung from the balconies and opened cracks in the whitewashed walls of even the best-kept mansions, and the only signs of life at two o'clock in the afternoon were languid piano exercises played in the dim light of siesta."

Now most of the mansions have been restored, their balconies laden with potted plants, their façades festooned with flowers hanging from creepers that climb up the porches with plaited trunks that look like twists of wooden spaghetti.

The streets are alive again: children in uniform snake to and from school, and in the palm-filled plazas hawkers wheel handcarts piled high with fruits.

At night, García Márquez has Florentino walking with a companion "through the old city, where their footsteps echoed like horses' hooves on the cobblestones.

From time to time, fragments of fugitive voices escaped through the open balconies, bedroom confidences, sobs of love magnified by phantasmal acoustics and the hot fragrance of jasmine in the narrow, sleeping streets."

Now, after dusk falls and the chattering wild parrots have returned to their roosts, the plazas come alive to the sounds of Colombia spilling out of the bars: the local rhythms of cumbia and vallenato as well as salsa.

You never go long without hearing the voice of Shakira, who comes from the nearby city of Barranquilla, and who contributed a couple of heartfelt songs to the film's soundtrack.

If you are lucky, you might catch a live performance at the Teatro Heredia, the theatre that in the film is the location for a poetry competition. This is also one of the venues, incidentally, for the Hay Festival Cartagena, an offshoot of the original in Hay-on-Wye, which will take place in the city for the fourth time in January.

In García Márquez's story, Florentino finds himself sitting next to another amateur poet, one Sara Noriega. They console each other in defeat, and he walks her back to her home in the "old Gethsemane District". Getsemaní, incidentally, is Cartagena's old artisans' quarter, now home to several budget hotels.

Attracted by Sara's "astronomical bosom", Florentino embarks on an unconventional affair with her. "In order to reach the heights of glory, she had to suck on an infant's pacifier while they made love. Eventually they had a string of them, in every size, shape, and colour they could find in the market, and Sara Noriega hung them on the headboard."

Florentino found them helpful too, because Sara's "declamatory passion was such that at times she continued to shout her recitation as they made love, and Florentino Ariza had to force a pacifier into her mouth, as one did with children to make them stop crying."

Whether such encounters are commonplace among participants at the Latin American version of Britain's most prestigious literary gathering I cannot say; but Florentino is no stranger to romance. In the 51 years, nine months and four days during which he patiently waits to win back Fermina Daza, he keeps a book listing his other amours: 622 in total, all "long-term liaisons", not including "the countless fleeting adventures that did not even deserve a charitable note".

Perhaps a fondness for flesh is characteristic of Cartagena, or so a reclining nude in one of the plazas might suggest. She is the work of Fernando Botero, the country's most celebrated artist, and is endowed with all the curvaceous voluptuousness for which his paintings and sculptures are famous.

When I first saw her, I noticed that while most of her body was a dull weathered bronze her breasts shone a luminous gold. Next time I saw her, early one morning, I

understood: a municipal cleaner was buffing her up with a duster, polishing her breasts with gusto as if he thought he could arouse her to the world of the living. I commended him on his diligence. "Just doing my job," he said.

Whatever Cartagena's tastes in love, it is a city steeped in romance. On weekends, every opening in the fortifications seems to frame a pair of canoodling lovers, while down below, horse-drawn carriages take amorous couples for rides through the Old City.

For the country as a whole, Cartagena is synonymous with romance: when the Formula 1 driver Juan Pablo Montoya, the country's best-loved sportsman and a native of Bogotá, married in 2002, he chose to do so here – in the pretty colonial church of Santo Toribio.

You can visit the church, as well as other buildings that appear in the film: the church of San Pedro Claver, for example, in which Florentino and Fermina meet at Christmas Mass, and in which she later marries another man; or the "Arcade of the Scribes", shot on Plaza de Bolívar, where Florentino writes letters on behalf of illiterate lovers.

The locations I particularly enjoyed seeing in the film, however, were the many interiors: especially the courtyards of the colonial houses. For just as the city is essentially inward-looking, bound by its walls, so too are many of its grandest houses: forbidding on the outside, but revealing, through mighty wooden doorways, patios and courtyards surrounded by arcaded loggias, framed by staircases, and filled with plants.

Some you can visit, such as the Casa del Marqués de Valdehoyos, which in the film is the house in which the young Fermina lived. For me, one of the great pleasures of the city is simply wandering around, catching glimpses of courtyards and cloisters, illuminated occasionally by the flash of an emerald hummingbird flitting between the flowers.

Cartagena's story, like García Márquez's novel, is a fable about the healing power of time, and about the rewards that faith and patience bring. And whether you are travelling to Cartagena in person or on the wings of Garcia Márquez's prose, this is one journey that you hope, against reason, will never end.