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## WEEKEND EXTRA



In the Colombian city of Cartagena, beauty contests are the highlight of the Independence Day festivities, an exuberant celebration of the revolution that ended Spanish colonial rule.

Geraldine Alvarez Marin and other contestants await their turn backstage at the Miss Popular beauty pageant in Cartagena, Colombia.

PHOTOS BY TALLULAH PHOTOGRAPHY

# The beauties of the barrios

BY ROBERTA STALEY

Night has fallen, but the stadium lights illuminate the soccer pitch with the intensity of high noon, making the grass gleam chartreuse. Every seat in Cartagena's Estadio 11 de noviembre stadium is taken — not that anyone is sitting.

It is the bikini segment of the annual Miss Popular beauty pageant and each of the 25 contestants' supporters — men, women and children — jump up and down and wave handmade signs as their favourite sashays along the stage in the infield. It is as loud and riotous as any soccer match in this soccer-

mad — and pageant-mad — Caribbean city, located on Colombia's northern coastline.

Miss Popular, or Reinado Popular de Cartagena, is the Cinderella of Colombian beauty pageants, running in conjunction with the prestigious Miss Colombia contest, or Concurso Nacional de la belleza.

These two spectacles are part of the two-week holiday, Fiestas Novembrinas, commemorating Nov. 11, 1811, the date when the Act of Absolute Independence was invoked, unshackling the nation from nearly three centuries of Spanish colonial rule.

In Colombia, the word "popular" means not only "well-

liked" but "for the poor" and underlines the social and economic divisions in Colombia. The Miss Popular contestants are not from Colombia's light-skinned upper crust, whose members can afford to (as catily discussed in gossip blogs) pay for cosmetic surgery.

Rather, they represent each of the 25 Afro-Colombian barrios, or slum neighbourhoods, of Cartagena, a walled fort city founded in 1533 as a slave trading and commercial port exporting gold, silver and emeralds to Europe.

**Fiesta reveller with communal bottle of Caribbean rum in Cartagena.**



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# Pageants are welcome respite from civil strife

CONTINUED FROM PAGE D1

The swimsuit round is finished. Next up is the glamorous evening gown segment. With skin made velvety smooth by a patina of bronze-gold glitter, the young women float down the stage, dazzling in glitter, satin, feathers, silk, crystals and chiffon. They come from barrios with names like Las Palmeras and Torices, words made musical by the Spanish allegro of rolled r's. Their supporters, tipsy on rum, chant the names of the barrios like cheerleaders. It is tradition, in Cartagena, to pack your own bottle of Caribbean rum and a shot glass when partying. Strangers are urged to knock back some of the gut-searing liquid from the communal glass. Hygienic? Who cares? Es una fiesta!

The Miss Popular contest, despite its humble connotations, does not mean that Colombians consider this event second-rate to the national contest, where the winner and runner-up compete in the Miss Universe and Miss International pageant.

If anything, Cartageneros are even more fanatical about Miss Popular, says my guide Adriana Campos, an amateur historian and self-confessed pageant junkie. For Cartageneros, the Miss Popular contest honours such feminine virtues as natural beauty, grace and selflessness. However, it is nuanced with political idealism. Miss Popular, Campos says, embodies what Nov. 11 stands for: the African slaves played a crucial political and military role in overthrowing Spanish rule, which ultimately led to their own emancipation.

As Campos says, the winner of Miss Popular becomes, borrowing from Lady Diana's moniker, the "people's princess," reminding them that beauty can emerge from a humble thralls. For the women of the barrios, beauty contests are a way out of poverty as well as a bold declaration of equality, not only for the contestant but the barrio that they represent.

It is nearing midnight. The long list of sponsors has been thanked, a local Afro-Latin cumbia band has played, and a handful of expectant finalists await the decision of the judges. Backstage, where they undergo a final primp, is one of Colombia's most famous beauties, Jeymy Paola Vargas. Seven years ago, Vargas won Miss Popular, brazenly entered the Miss Colombia pageant the following year, and took that crown, too. As an encore she was anointed Miss International in 2004 in Beijing.

Dressed in a simple shift, lustrous hair cascading casually down her shoulders, Vargas, who models in Europe, is uniquely magnificent, even among this bevy of beauties. Her exalted presence seems to rub off, for the young woman from her barrio of Chapacua — 18-year-old Geraldine Alvarez Marin, in a borrowed white gown beaded with Swarovski crystals — takes the crown: a shiny coronet

that looks like it is made of tin. Meanwhile, across town at the Miss Colombia pageant, in front of an elegantly coiffed but blandly civilized televised audience, 21-year-old Natalia Navarro Galvis emerges the winner. An 18-karat gold corona is planted upon her dark tresses.

The pageants, says one Colombian, not only celebrates the famed beauty of the nation's women, but is a reprieve from the oppressive crime afflicting the country. Immersed in civil war since the mid-1960s, Colombia is the world's largest supplier of cocaine and has one of the globe's highest (although decreasing) kidnapping and murder rates.

**The beauty pageant will many doors for Geraldine. She will study and find a good career, because women need to be independent.**

**AIDEE HERNANOLEZ**  
WINNER'S MOTHER

Such troubles are forgotten in the festival's cascade of sensory overload: regattas, mini-parades for the pageant contestants, street performers, the gay Sexual Diversity Parade with its own beauty "queen," the spectacular Independence Day parade, the rum, the street food, the exuberant people.

Vendors sell spears of succulent barbecued kebabs and ice cream Popsicles that steam in the tropical heat. Fresh-caught clams, crab, squid and oysters, mixed with homemade mayonnaise and fresh-squeezed lime, are served in Styrofoam cups for the equivalent of \$1. A shot of piping hot Colombian coffee sets you back half that.

Schools are closed and pranksters spray white foam and water and throw blue powder dye at each other day and night. Firecrackers explode in the streets and loud music thumps from the local bars until the early morning hours. "The festivities," says Campos dryly, "can be annoying."

To understand the passion Cartageneros have for Independence Day, one need only look to the oppression suffered by their forebears. This is starkly illuminated by a visit to a 17th-century ornate baroque building called the Palace of the Holy Inquisition, or Palacio de la Inquisicion, Museo Historico de Cartagena.

The museum air is hot and musty, but the interpretative signage and exhibits chilling. It was here that the Spanish tyrants punished heretics and alleged witches as well as indigenous peoples who refused conversion to Catholicism.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



PHOTOS BY TALLULAH PHOTOGRAPHY

Triumphant 18-year-old Geraldine Alvarez Marin returns to her home neighbourhood 'barrio' after winning the 2009 Miss Popular title. Beautiful colourful houses are typical of Cartagena.

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TALLULAH PHOTOGRAPHY

Revellers celebrate the crowning of their new queen with copious amounts of spray foam.

FROM PAGE D4

The torture devices were fantastical in their cruelty, and included such implements as the Heretic's Fork. The victim's neck was stretched back and a leather collar, holding a heavy, double-ended fork about 30 cm long, was strapped on. One sharp, pronged end pierced the chin, the other dug into neck just above the sternum, forcing an admission of heresy that would condemn the victim to death. The Inquisition lasted until the revolution of 1811.

The next day, following the anointing of Marin as Miss Popular 2009, my guide and I grab a taxi to join the celebrations at the winner's barrio. The blue-green Caribbean water glitters in the sun as we bump along the beach, past the imposing Castillo san Felipe de Barajas and its impenetrable fortress walls. Made of stone and rock-hard coral harvested from the sea by slaves, the walls once enveloped the entire city, protecting it from attacks by gold-obsessed

pirates and buccaneers like England's Sir Francis Drake.

The barrio of Chapacua is a warren of one-storey homes with tin roofs secured by heavy bits of iron. Narrow, rutted dirt roads littered with rocks twist among the 500 residences. As we near Marin's home, the crowd thickens and the air fills with tinny Latin rhythms coaxed out of an old saxophone and trumpet. We toss back more obligatory shots of rum, then knock at the two-room home where Marin lives with her parents and four siblings. Marin's mother, Aideé Hernanolez, a handsome woman of 42, holds court in the tiny living room.

"The beauty pageant will open many doors for Geraldine," Hernanolez says happily. "She will study and find a good career, because women need to be independent."

I ask Hernanolez if the Miss Colombia and Miss Popular pageants should be merged to help foster class equality in Colombia. "No," she responds. "This is for the unity of the barrio, the national contest is for

the unity of the country."

Marin shows up two hours late to her barrio party, escorted by police whose beatific expressions say more clearly than words how they feel about pulling today's shift. In a white sundress and wearing a pageant sash in the colours of the Colombian flag, Marin strides in her stilettos down the rutted road as gracefully as if she is on flat ground. She takes the proffered microphone and beams at the mass of admirers. "I cannot believe that I won," she tells them. "I give thanks to God and my neighbourhood. This crown belongs to you, the people."

Marin steps away from the microphone, a cue to young pranksters to spray everyone with foam. Their new queen is not exempt. After all, she is still one of them, despite her stately new status. The struggle against class inequality will continue, both for Marin and the people of the barrio. And with Marin leading the way, class struggle never looked so good.

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