

Cuba

**An unforgettable
journey**







AGENDA

*Cuba is a paradox: political minefield, communist sanctuary and stronghold, emerging luxury destination and adventurer's paradise, all rolled into one. It has a turbulent past and its future is precariously uncertain. But, as **DANIELA AROCHE** reports on her journey to the island, for better or worse it continues to capture the imagination of travellers.*

The initial decision any aspiring traveller needs to make before embarking on a trip to Cuba is to ask themselves what kind of holiday they want to have.

At a glance this might seem an obvious proposition. But anyone who knows anything about its revolutionary past, present battles and future challenges should realise before buying a ticket that this is a country in the midst of an intriguing and heady transition – and that this shift, which is already at full throttle, offers two very different paths to any prospective tourist.

Part of its history is well-known to most – after all, one can hardly think of the country without conjuring up the image of Che Guevara, the iconic Latin American revolutionary whose handsome face, haunting look and polarising legacy launched myriad merchandising licenses and trinkets around the globe.

If you haven't heard of him, then Fidel Castro will ring a bell: Guevara's comrade in arms, communist stalwart and the man who inspired a nation and led the 26th of

July Movement that toppled Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista.

Cuba's turbulent and fascinating past poses little mystery to most, but those who dig deeper will find its captivating history stretches much further – way back to Diego Velazquez, Gerardo Machado, Jose Gomez, Christopher Columbus, José Martí and up to the aforementioned Batista (although not in that exact order). Even the Italian-American Mafia had their day here and quite a large casino outpost for a while on this rugged strip of tropical paradise.

Yet, for all Cuba's awe-inspiring richness of character, the inherent warmth of its people and the vibrant tapestry that a melding of cultures has woven through the ages, there is another side to this island destination — a darker, more desolate and poverty-stricken underbelly that can only be described as an eerie, silent landscape, where the ghosts of rebels and socialist radicals are all that remain.

But back to the choice: that first trip, regular tourists muse, will lead you fine days, rum cocktails, sunset dinners by the sea and general jolly rambunctiousness. You'll also be in great company with the gaggle of American, Asian and European travellers already flocking to Cuba's shores in droves, and in greater numbers every year now that the communist curtain has lifted somewhat.

Choose this route, and what I can recommend is booking an airport pickup in an immaculately vintage classic car from the 1950s (online and ahead of time); followed by a check-in and stay at the brand-spanking new five-star Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski or iconic Hotel Nacional in the capital, Havana.

Once you're settled in, take a relaxing stroll by Havana's seaside promenade Le Malecon; dine at one of the many restaurants in the central business district and chic urban hub of Vedado; then, if you're up for a nightcap, listen to jazz at the speakeasy La Zorra y el Cuervo or try any of the bars in the area for a taste of one of the many top-notch rums produced all over the island (Havana Club Añejo 15 Años Gran Reserva is our pick).

If you have more time, then what many would recommend is a short day trip to Varadero, a resort beach town in the province of Matanzas (about two hours east of the capital); or the traditional and agricultural outpost of Viñales – a small town and municipality in the north-central Pinar del Río province of Cuba. There you'll find a beautiful, lush valley anointed by UNESCO in 1999 where cigar-chewing guajiros (Cuban rural workers) drive their oxen and ploughs through rust-coloured tobacco fields; where life seems slower, and you can buy the best cigars on the cheap that you'll ever get your hands on.

For an even more tranquil and pampering vacation,

you can escape to any one of the stunning myriad playas (beaches) and cayos (keys) draped around the island, each more pristine than the next, boasting crystal clear waters and people sunning themselves on the golden sands, usually with fruity cocktails in hand.

It's a beautiful life and a magical experience if you choose this path – as most people will – particularly if you're after a little touch of luxury as part of your holiday retreat.

However, those who want adventure and to immerse themselves in the country, who want to get a real look at its people beyond the dancing and the drinking, should dare to take the road less travelled.

This journey, the one I took, is the revolutionaries' road – more sombre, perhaps, but ultimately all the more authentic.

It begins without a plan, a map, and on a shoe-string budget with a few local contacts scribbled down on a scrunched-up, grubby piece of paper, garnered from backpackers who had mingled with the locals and stayed with poorer families in *posadas* along the way before me.

My personal and slightly tougher trajectory took me across half of Cuba, stopping at Old Havana – the more decrepit corner of the capital – and into the cobbled streets and colonial towns of Cienfuegos and Trinidad; and through to Santa Clara, the site of Che Guevara's epic rebel battle and last showdown with Batista's troops back in December 1958. It's also the place where his bones now lie in a memorial and mausoleum on the abandoned outskirts of the city, laid to rest on October 17, 1997, after being returned from Bolivia, where he was summarily executed on October 9, 1967, while trying to bring revolution to rural workers there.

On this trip, my photographer, his parents and I shared the road with Noel – our (very round, very outspoken and stubborn) Cuban driver – and his *caro* (darling), a beat-up 1950s Chevy, a glorious old beast of a vehicle, all white and green and falling to pieces but his pride and joy. I've never seen someone who loved their car so much, nor took such care of it.

H AVANA: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

This hardy, resilient nation has, as mentioned, always stood out for its feisty history, and it's this aspect of the country's character that is particularly evident upon arrival at Havana's José Martí International Airport.

When you arrive the shift towards a very different society is palpable. Dressed in green military fatigues, the customs and security officers are mainly female and each – and every one sports sexy, close-fit uniforms and fishnet tights. It's not too far a statement to say that you feel

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you’ve stepped into a Roger Rabbit cartoon.

Defiantly (the tights are not part of their official uniform) they flaunt their sexuality with a confidence most women wish they possessed, all while checking and ordering tourists around and letting them know who’s the boss.

Getting a cab into town is another adventure. Pick whichever smiling assassin takes your fancy – you won’t be able to get a good deal on your ride unless you’ve already booked a driver online as noted above. And make sure you change some money into “cucs” (the official tourist currency) before you fly if you can – otherwise you’ll be at the mercy of locals on the exchange rate. Cubans use “cucs”, not to be confused.

Once you’re in the glorious and bustling hub of Havana, the other thing you’ll notice is the warmth of the smiles that greet you as you stroll through the city streets. Cubans are known for it and, regardless of their current struggles, this vanguard of their vibrant and hospitable culture remains in spades.

The key draws of the capital for most tourists are the impressive and expansive plazas, sprinkled throughout the city like majestic throwbacks to a time of plenty, before communism came and robbed them of their grandeur.

The most popular streets around them are lined with

bars, shops and restaurants (which tell the tale that communism is easing its grip, even here), and many of the main buildings surrounding the plazas have been somewhat restored to their former glory with some weathered structures gutted and transformed into galleries or hotels, such as the Kempinski, on the site of the historic Manzana de Gómez (Gómez Block) building, an early 20th century building that was Cuba’s first shopping mall.

Once you’ve seen that, and all the other tried and trusted hotspots – El Capitolio, Catedral de San Cristobal, Castillo de la Real Fuerza, Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña (also Che Guevara’s former official command headquarters), Museo de la Revolución, etcetera; and walked in Hemingway’s footsteps (La Floridita, La Bodeguita del Medio, and our favourite, the Hotel Ambos Mundos).

However, what I would recommend is exploring some of the lesser-known alleys, cultural spots and smaller bars and dining spots recommended by the locals. A few such spots are the Museo de Mexico, Finca Vigía (Hemingway’s house); and Draquecitos, a tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Old Havana that you’ll definitely miss if you don’t know what to look for.

Here a charming young Cuban by the name of Alexis and his partner Elianet cook up delectable Cuban fare with heart, soul and smiles. They also run a travel company – Blue Paradise Booking – and can organise a car to take you around (Noel is one of their contacts), accommodation with locals and pretty much anything else you need while you’re in town. They helped us more than once out of the kindness of their hearts, and will remain our friends for life.

In essence, Havana is a paradox – one half boasting impressive, old-world opulence with its refurbished buildings, organised plazas, bustling streets and dining spots overrun with tourists; and the other side of it, where many Cubans live, looks like a shanty town of dilapidated edifices. The buildings are scarcely standing, just skeletons with crumbling walls housing locals who have barely enough to eat because they are restricted to rations of a bag of rice, a stick of butter and a handful of beans every month. This is the harsh reality for anyone who scratches the surface of this once majestic city.

It is still hauntingly beautiful, though, and very much fun after hours if you’re a bit of a night owl, so head to the bars post-sunset if you dare: it’s definitely worth your while.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK:
CIENFUEGOS, TRINIDAD & SANTA
CLARA

If you have more time and want to see



something other than Viñales, Varadero, Bay of Pigs and all the beaches, then Cienfuegos and Trinidad are two perfectly preserved UNESCO world heritage sites that offer colonial charm by the bundle.

However, my favourite and perhaps the least visited location of all those I've mentioned here is Santa Clara, Che Guevara's beloved city and final resting place.

There's not much to see here for the regular tourist other than the Museo histórico de la Revolución and the Che Guevara Mausoleum, crowned by a massive bronze statue of the revolutionary leader under which Guevara and other fighters lie. But it is full of life somehow and truly left its mark, although we didn't stay long.

Here the spirit of the revolution seems stronger, for obvious reasons, and the people seem happier and seem to have more.

In the main square, on the only night we stayed, we danced in the moonlight with a troop of weathered musicians at the old Teatro de Caridad to the sounds of salsa and Afro-Cuban jazz, swept away by the talents of local artists revelling in their craft. In the morning we mingled with locals over coffee, packed our bags and took one last look at the Santa Clara Libre Hotel in the centre of the city where, more than 50 years ago, Che Guevara won the final battle of the Cuban revolution and clinched it for Fidel Castro, sending Batista fleeing from the country. The bullet holes are still there in the concrete walls.

But perhaps the most interesting and telling experience of the entire trip is one which encapsulates the true soul of the Cuban people and exemplifies the

ethos behind their socialist ideals.

Somewhere along the way we got a flat tire, and Noel stopped on the dusty track to take stock of the damage. There, nestled along the curve of the desolate dirt road, a Cuban farmer was building a house, methodically cutting each piece of timber and slowly stacking it to make his home, piece by piece.

They greeted each other warmly, even though they had never met before, and Noel asked him whether he had a spare tire and some food. The man responded "yes" and asked Noel up to the main farmhouse on the hill.

Grabbing a bag of bananas from the back of the car, Noel turned and left us stranded and slightly confused as to what was going on, and an hour later had not returned. When he finally did grace us with his presence again, he had the wheel and a bag of oranges. No bananas in sight.

When we asked him about the exchange, and whether we had to pay for the wheel and the man's assistance, he simply looked at us and scoffed. "We don't do things that way here," he said. "He's my brother. He's happy to help me. He just asked me to swap him some bananas for the wheel, then he gave me some oranges for the road." Bananas, it seems, are quite hard to get your hands on in Cuba, so that was well worth the tyre and some oranges, too.

That simple exchange told me all I needed to know about capitalism, socialism and everything in between when it comes to Cuba.

Yes, as is often the case in revolutions, sometimes we must destroy the remnants of the past in order to usher

in a new era. But that doesn't mean we should abandon our foundations, our history, our dignity or the basic qualities that makes us all human, such as the simple exchanges from one person to another, that sense of solidarity where a helping hand doesn't come at a price.

The world has moved on, and perhaps so must Cuba in order to survive and thrive. Indeed, the people themselves seem to be crying out for a shift, economically at least.

Exactly how they decide to do it, however, will determine whether they honour the core ideals of their heroes, the combatistas y comandantes (combatants and commanders).

What I will say is that vultures are everywhere, figuratively and literally, circling overhead every city and every landscape. These haunting birds are a common sight, but they seemed to embody an omen of what could be as capitalist opportunists exploit Cuba, setting up luxury hotels and expensive restaurants across the island.

What of the future? In June the Trump Administration imposed major new travel restrictions on visits to Cuba by US citizens, including a ban on many forms of educational and recreational travel, which promises to cut off one of the main avenues for Americans to visit the Caribbean island and will likely deal a heavy blow to the country's fragile economy.

A new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, who was inaugurated in April last year, was handpicked by Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother, an almost unknown candidate. According to the people we spoke to he is still a socialist with strong communist ideals, but is considerably more open-minded on the subject of economic development, international trade and tourism. He is also seen as a man of the people who has started initiatives to improve the country, including plans for a new transport system and buses. We shall see.

Vacation numbers are also up – and set to rise, despite the ban on Americans – with Cuban Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero announcing via Twitter in May that two million visitors had already arrived on the island, a figure reached 12 days earlier than in 2018.

The country's luxury appeal is also growing, with several lifestyle-led news outlets announcing that that

Cuba is entering the market with gusto. The Kempinski conglomerate, for example, seems to think it's on a winner and plans to open a second location, a high-end facility in Guillermo Key, north of the central province of Ciego de Avila. Apparently, there is now also a shop selling a camera for more than US\$25,000 (RM102,000) in Havana.

When you compare that to the daily life, run-down accommodations and meagre food rations of a local Cuban – in a country with a shady human rights record where the government reportedly (according to Human Rights Watch) continues to repress and punish dissent and public criticism, and the average wage is US\$30 (RM122) a month – the statistics don't exactly add up.

Ultimately, the best advice I can give to anyone considering a Cuban travel adventure is two-fold: go quickly, before it changes; and go there with a clean slate, ready to have your opinions and preconceptions of the country and its people challenged.

For me, the lasting sentiment from my time in the country is that Cuba's challenge today is the same as it is for the rest of the world: it's not about socialism versus capitalism, but about finding an altogether new way forward.

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F AREWELL: HASTA LA VICTORIA, SIEMPRE.

We made it back to Havana a little the worse for wear, but full of memorable experiences – and barely escaping the tail of a tornado that

had swept through the city less than a day before our arrival.

Havana had once again been brought to its knees, the age-old shells of its ancient buildings ravaged by the forces of nature that are part and parcel of its tropical location on the continental shelf, smack-bang off the Gulf of Mexico. Yet there remained that air of resilience, the calling card of the Cuban people – standing strong, against all the odds.

All I can hope is that this unique spirit – which ultimately defines this wonderfully diverse, impossibly intricate and incredibly complex country with its impressive history – never changes. “Hasta la victoria, siempre.”(Ever onward to victory.)

I love you Cuba. X ʘ



