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Secret Caribbean

The Cuban island where time stands still

You may think you know Cuba, but think again. Lydia Bell discovers an island idyll untouched by mass tourism



GAVRIEL JEAN / DANITA DELMONT / ALAMY

The girl in the agency recoils when we mention Isla de la Juventud, the Isle of Youth. "¿Pero por quéeee?" she demands. "There is nothing there. No people, no air conditioning." She begs us to go to an all-inclusive in Key Largo instead.

The owner of the house in which we stayed in Havana tells me to watch out for "antisocial behaviour". Hold on to your wallet, he says. I look out of the window of his apartment at a woman fishing bones out of the rubbish next to where three *bicitaxi* owners are embroiled in a fight. La Isla is too uncivilised for a hardened inhabitant of central Havana?

So it is with some trepidation that we step off the boat on to the dock of this dangerous outpost. We are about to search for a cab when I hear someone saying my name. There's a man on a bicycle balancing against a wall. He introduces himself as Jorge, the owner of the house where we are to stay. "I thought you might be on this ferry, so I thought I'd save you the hassle of finding my house," he says.

And so begins our spell on La Isla, the home of the most helpful, unhurried people in Cuba. Jorge and Rey own Villa Mas, just behind the hospital. Inside there are terraces with parrots, fish, terrapins and greenery. Everything is sparkling clean. The decor is a high-camp Latino kitsch, with frothy pink curtains, knick-knacks and plastic flowers, a Cuban interiors dream. Jorge is a teacher of gastronomy at a local college, and the daily help, Clara, produces sublime breakfast platters and juices, which range from grapefruit and mango to pineapple and guava.

We devote the day to the mean streets of Nueva Gerona and find an overgrown village where cars are accorded little respect. People swarm everywhere, two to a bike, on foot and in horsedrawn carriages. They buy plantains in a marketplace burnt by the sun and crowd second-hand clothes stalls. Everyone looks well fed and they are jollier than *Habaneros* (residents of Havana).

A short drive out of town at Playa Paradiso the sand is scrubby, but it's in a bay surrounded by towering peaks and has a laid-back atmosphere, with classic cars parked by a restaurant built out into the sea, where you can eat pork and rice for a few pesos. A horse and cart runs us back into town. Later the streets are filled with teenagers dancing salsa in sparkly shorts and stilettos. At a bar called Cubana an older crowd drink on rocking chairs on a first-storey terrace overlooking the street.

La Isla is stunning. It has downy pastures dotted with mangos, palms, delicate pines and banana trees. It has soaring granite peaks and pale, shimmering lakes. There is a sense of space and freedom, the empty highway slicing the island lengthways.

The driver complains that fewer tourists come each year. Always under-populated, La Isla has a part-renegade, part-revolutionary history. The Spanish left it to English pirates to rule, which, from the 16th century, they did — making boats from pines — until the Americans installed an anti-pirate squadron in 1821. By the 20th century, Americans controlled the island. They developed resorts and infrastructure, including the 1926 Presidio Modelo, an imposing prison capable of housing 6,000. Political prisoners were incarcerated there — most famously, Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl — in the 1950s.

After the revolution, Castro turned the Presidio Modelo into a museum, but its decay serves as a reminder of the island's abandonment. The circular blocks are rotting, silent hulks. I close my eyes, but I can't pretend to imagine the clamour of thousands. There is no one here, save two skinny boys waiting for a boxing lesson.

In the 1960s the island was a hive of agricultural activity. Even recently, the "orchard of Cuba" produced a million tonnes of

No one is chasing the tourist dollar here. It is calm and placid



Seeing the sights Lydia Bell at the former jail where Castro was incarcerated in the 1950s

grapefruit annually: now it is only a thousand. The crops were destroyed by a hurricane in September 2008, our driver says. A lack of infrastructure and machinery — and neglect — compound the problem.

In the days when the Soviet Union was bankrolling Cuba, La Isla welcomed thousands of students from countries with a socialist bent. Yemenis, Angolans and Nicaraguans flocked here. Now, abandoned schools dot the landscape, forgotten monuments to an idealistic past. We find that many modest attractions have not recovered from the hurricane. The crocodile farm was badly damaged, along with the Jungla de Jones, a once-beautiful botanical garden. A soporific guide has nothing to show us but two crotchety monkeys in a cage. The remote farm where Cuba's hero of independence, José Martí, was imprisoned is at the foot of a mountain down a road flanked with banana crops. There is no one here but smoking builders.

We drive back to Nueva Gerona along a desolate highway, the sun dipping behind the pines, past people pedalling on bikes without lights, past people rocking on porches. Outside Nueva Gerona we see a dog curled up in the fast lane.

The next day we explore the south — a giant reserve guarded by the military, for reasons unknown. Beyond the checkpoint

you must be accompanied by a guide hired from Ecotur in Nueva Gerona. There is nothing but wilderness and potholed roads. White-tailed deer, scuttling crabs and iguanas rule the roost. I ask Neri, our guide, if we are the only tourists there today. We are the only ones this month, he says.

At the park's southwesterly point is Cocodrilo, its villagers descended from turtle-hunting Cayman Islanders. Wooden houses look out to a turquoise sea. Skinny, nut-brown boys do elaborate somersaults into a lagoon from the mollusc-encrusted rocks. I see more driving a horse and cart. There is one phone in town, broken on the day we visit, and 24-hour electricity has only recently arrived, along with televisions and fridges, Neri says. A further 18km (11 miles) through the Bosque Encantado (the "enchanted wood") is Playa Frances, a deserted beach with white sands backed with tangled mangroves and sprinkled with giant sculptural shells. The sun is fierce and the water is as warm as a baby's bath.

I think of the scathing way people spoke about La Isla in Havana, and laugh. Because no one is chasing the tourist dollar here, La Isla is placid and calming. If Cuba is 50 years behind the rest of the world, La Isla feels 50 years behind Cuba. I just hope that the Government doesn't install an all-inclusive resort any time soon.



Getting there

La Isla de la Juventud: from Havana, flying with Cubana is best. La Boca, Camaguey province: from Havana, fly with Cubana to Camaguey, then take an unmetred taxi to La Boca (about 40 Cuban pesos, £27.50). Rio Canimar in Matanzas province: from Havana, catch the Viazul bus to Matanzas, then take a local

cab (£5.50). Sierra Maestra in Granma province: the access hub for Santo Domingo is Bayamo. From Havana, Cubana flies to Bayamo. Then you need a tourist taxi to get you up the mountain.

Flights

Cubana is at Calle 23 No 64 esq a Infanta, Vedado. 00537 834 4446, cubana.cu

Buses

Viazul is at Avenida 26 y Zoológico, Nuevo Vedado, Havana. 811413, viazul.cu

Booking services

Most big hotels in Havana have a travel agency.

Other unsung rural spots

La Boca, Camaguey province

At La Boca, a clutch of clapboard shacks hug the shoreline, overhung by fat palms providing shade on the pale sands. This is a proper fishing village with washing strung between the coconut trunks, children playing and villagers pulling lobsters out of the water. At the other end of the beach are two seafood restaurants for tourists who come in for the day from the holiday playground of Santa Maria, 8km down the road. La Boca is another planet: a one-phone village. If a villager rents a room to you, it's not strictly legal, but then

the tourist peninsula of Varadero, rural Matanzas is surprisingly wild. Hotels in Varadero will sell you day trips to the banks of Rio Canimar, where you'll be transported along with the other tourists. For a more authentic experience ask a car to take you to the Canimar Abajor river entrance site, near a camping ground about 10km from Matanzas. Here, you can swim and eat and wander. Cubans relax by drinking rum, eating copious amounts of pork and beans and playing deafening salsa. If you want a moment of silence, hire a rowboat. Round one river bend and the giant palms and emerald green waters will swallow you up.



Local trade Fishing for supper on La Isla

nothing fun is in Cuba. And who wouldn't forsake the resort buffet for snapper caught that day and cooked in front of you, and an evening spent listening to the waves crash at your feet while admiring the night sky's constellations?

Rio Canimar, Matanzas province

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