

# KEEP PALM AND CARRY ON

*Despite its present travails, Cuba is attracting tourists determined to track down creative and nuanced expressions of its irrepressible spirit*

STORY LYDIA BELL PHOTOGRAPHY RAMA KNIGHT



The prettiest house for rent in the golden, UNESCO-protected quarter of Habana Vieja is called The Gardens. Typical of the historic district's many tucked-away architectural treasures, it is named after the palms that crowd the first-floor patio. Grand double doors frame doorways, inviting you into reading rooms, alfresco lounging areas, and bedrooms with four-posters and prettily tiled ensuites. A spiral staircase unfurls to a third floor and rooftop beyond. It would be easy to chance on archetypal Havana moments here – such as finding yourself alone in an elegant, triple-height salon playing on the 1920s Premier baby grand, the shutters thrown open to the rowdy, rutted street, the Caribbean sunlight pouring in.

The Gardens happened because some Cubans who owned astonishingly beautiful but dilapidated homes persuaded two foreign chums to help them transform it as a pet project. Manhattan-dwelling British design aficionado Jamie McDonald, a presenter, and Fat Radish restaurateur Phil Winsor, first helped out with two pastel-hued apartments in a 1940s edifice that paid homage to “Havana in the fun-time 1950s”, according to McDonald. “But The Gardens mirrors a time when colonial social clubs were more in vogue than cabaret and casinos.”

The UNESCO quarter of Old Havana has risen like a phoenix from the ashes over the past 15 years since the office of the city historian invested tourist money in antique squares and fountains, colonial façades and cobbled streets. When former president Raul Castro instigated a controlled opening of the private economy 11 years ago, investors pounced on marble staircases, wrought-iron balconies, ornate tiled floors, elaborate cornicing and handsome shuttering. Cubans sank in money from abroad and foreigners partnered with locals to realise their Havana dreams.

Building projects in Havana are pure hell. A desperate shortage of builders familiar with high-spec work, an excruciating lack of basic materials, from concrete to paint, and an unavailability of fittings, or furniture, equal little fun. So stylish places with a good finish are few.

There's Economía 156 by Stephen Bayly, erstwhile director of the British National Film School, and his partner, director Jazz Martínez – a turn-of-the-century home returned to its former glory and beyond with a modern kitchen, alarms, cameras and security lights. La Reserva, carved out of a 1914 neoclassical house in Vedado, was led by Belgian architect Thomas Verwacht and his Cuban wife Camila Yero; it's now a five-bedroom upmarket hotel. A second project, Oleo, doubles as a living art gallery and includes works by such Cuban luminaries as Choco, Servando Cabrera and Nelson Domínguez. Tiny private hotels include Paseo 206, Andrea and Diana Gallina's 10-room hotel with a 1930s vintage; and Malecon 663, an imposing 1912-era townhouse facing Havana's seawall that is now a four-bedroom hotel owned by a French-Cuban couple. Loma del Angel, a Catalan-funded two-bedroom hotel carved out of a long, thin townhouse in the Old Town, is chic, cosy and scented-candle-lit.

The tourist footprint of Havana is tight. It radiates out in a snake pattern, hugging the coast, from Old Havana to the rutted, rundown streets of Central Havana and then to the central Republican-era district of Vedado, with its grande dame hotels, sugar-baron houses, tree-lined grid streets and romantic squares, and ends in the western area of Miramar, the diplomatic quarter, with its wide avenues, grandiose embassies and mid-century dream homes, some with kidney-shaped pools. Restorations of interest span all these areas, but sometimes it's worth looking just outside the grid. Lea Diaz and her French husband Francois run Suite Havana, a restored two-bedroom apartment in rowdy Old Havana. But it can be pleasant to twin it with their architect-designed, minimalist loft-style triplex in the western fishing village of Santa Fe, just beyond Marina Hemingway, where you won't encounter another tourist.

The arrival of luxury places is connected with the recent story of



Above: **Eclectico**, the Italian restaurant at Paseo 206, a boutique hotel in Havana's Vedado district, and the hotel's salon.

Opposite: **Sandra Exposito**, the French owner of Malecon 663, a four-room hotel on Havana's sea wall; the hotel's rooftop; a room at Casa Deco in Playa district

Havana's tourism. Better places to stay, restaurants and bars were coming onstream by the noughties, but it was Barack Obama's 2014 restoring of diplomatic relations and opening of mainstream American travel that precipitated the explosion of investment. Americans couldn't resist seeing for themselves the fleets of Cadillacs and Buicks; the salsa clubs; the fragrant cigar and rum factories; the ornate churches and the street musicians of the forbidden island before “everything changed”. American cruise ships returned and the crowds surged once more over the Florida Straits. With a giddy 20 per cent surge in tourism, Cubans were celebrating the “ker-ching!” moment they had been waiting for for more than half a century.

The moment of glory ended with the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House. Almost three years later, Cuba is grappling with calamity. As punishment for Cuba's political support of Venezuela, the US is blockading tankers transporting Venezuelan oil. Cuba is functioning on about 60 per cent of what's needed. With a deeply flawed agricultural system, the island imports about 70 per cent of its food. Now the US is targeting international banks that do business with Cuba, making it harder for the country to pay its food bills. US cruise ships are banned from docking. American travellers are discouraged from visiting. Permitted remittances from the US have been capped at \$1000 per quarter. The US has unsuspended title three of the Helms Burton Act, so parties whose property was confiscated by the Cuban government after the 1959 Revolution can sue, in US courts, companies and individuals who “traffic” in the property. This means legal exposure for international companies operating in Cuba, which is putting new investors off. The US Department of Commerce announced it would revoke licenses of aircraft leases to Cuban state-owned airlines, and an expansion of sanctions on foreign goods containing US content.



## WE CAN NOW GO BEYOND THE EXPECTED - AND STILL GLORIOUS - BALLET NIGHTS, VINTAGE CAR JAUNTS, SALSA LESSONS, RUM TASTINGS AND BEACH FORAYS



Mostly as a result of all this, Cuba is gripped by food and petrol shortages and power outages. The government has invented a phrase to describe what is going on. It is the “Periodo Conyuntural”. The obfuscating Socialist reference seems to suggest that this “conjuncture” is an unfortunate but transient thing. But the same question is on everyone's lips: If Donald Trump is elected for another four years in November 2020, how will Cuba, as we know it – or indeed Cubans themselves – survive?

Regardless of everything, the tourism genie is out of the bottle, and life in travel goes on. Indeed, if the current stance is sustained, travel to Cuba will become one of the only ways it will be possible to support ordinary Cubans. For visitors to Cuba now, there is a silver lining in this cloud. The groups that had come to occupy every restaurant are no longer visible. Havana's streets are no longer trampled by mass tourism. Plus, what the American avalanche provoked was the evolution of a nuanced experiential travel experience that the rest of us can still enjoy. We can now go way beyond the expected (and still glorious) ballet nights, vintage car jaunts, salsa lessons, rum tastings and beach forays.

Now, with a decent operator on board, encounters can be transformational and privileged, in the best meaning of the word. If you're interested in Afro-centrism, you can meet with a respected historian in the field. If you're curious about LGBT realities, you can have dinner with Cuba's first transsexual member of Parliament. If you're crazy about cinema, you can meet with curators in the contemporary Cuban field. If you're into marine biologists, you can go diving with one. You can go touring the city on a pastel-hued electric bike with a private guide. For those who love to watch dance, the roots of rumba go deeper than those of salsa – back 400 years, in fact. The Afro-Cuban dance has only been allowed true expression since the



1980s, and is often commercialised for tourists. To counter this, British composer Sue Herrod runs private, interpretative sessions on secluded rooftops for visitors with dancers from Clave y Guaguanco, once of the island's foremost troupes.

A topsy-turvy shopping day focused on artisanal ware, slow fashion and *objets trouvés* is fascinating. Graphic designer Idania del Río and her partner Leire Fernandez's Clandestina is a tiny fashion brand with a small shop in an Old Havana workshop that's so influential that Zara has just ripped off its line of silkscreen printed T-shirts and bags. Dador, which is run by women, sources quality linen and sews it into beautiful dresses above its Old Havana shop. Alma sells Cuban *artesanía* such as guayabera shirts, embroidered cotton dresses and upcycled jewellery. Memorias sells military memorabilia, old stamps and cigar labels.

Hemingway made Havana his home on and off from the 1930s until just before he died in 1961. In 1940, he used the money he made on *For Whom The Bell Tolls* to buy Finca Vigia, a farmhouse south of Havana. After his death, his wife Mary gave it to the Cuban government, who kept it as the couple left it, down to the blood pressure readings scrawled on the bathroom wall. Valerie Hemingway, who was Hemingway's personal assistant, conducts a wonderful tour of Finca Vigia, though she works with a select few agencies. An effervescent conversationalist, she talks

From top left: A room in Loma del Angel hotel in Old Havana; bedroom in Economía 156, an apartment in Barrio Arsenal; lobby of Loma del Angel; classic car in Centro Habana and children playing. Opposite: Front terrace, entrance hall and back garden seating at La Reserva in El Vedado district; Moorish-style folly in Jardines del Tropical

about Hemingway the man rather than the persona. Her anecdotes are mind-blowing: road trips with John Dos Pasos, lunches with Orson Welles. But equally delicious are the details – such as that the writer wrote standing up between 6am and 10am, and religiously went to a cockfight on Sundays.

A tired joke in Cuba is that the three failures of the Revolution were “breakfast, lunch and dinner”. During the “Special Period” in the 1990s, after Cuba sank like a stone with the Soviet Union, that was more than true. These days, despite food supply issues and onerous regulation, culinary creativity is back. Food culture has transmogrified, with private businesses allowing chefs to return from exile with a bit of capital to realise their dreams.

Jama restaurant in Old Havana is the brainchild of Carlos Alonso Acosta, a protégé of Tomas Erasmo Hernandez, erstwhile chef for Fidel Castro who himself runs a small restaurant in the Old Town called Mama Ines. Alonso fuses Asian and Mexican flavours and ingredients, with sushi and pickled quail eggs, pork belly taco and ceviche with maize toast, veggie soups scented with lemongrass and the ají pepper. At Grados, in the central district of Vedado, the young and charismatic Raulito Bazuk creates Cuban plates with a twist – such as lamb from the Sierra Escambray slow-cooked in a local herbal soft drink. In Miramar,

the diplomatic quarter, Enrique Suarez's Tocamadera creates menus that shift radically in response to whatever is available that day in this land of shortages, from truffle risotto to dewy-fresh avocado soup.

My favourite gourmet moment can be had 18km west at the farm of Nicaraguan-born, Alain Ducasse-trained Annabelle Cantarrer, who moved her life to a hilly outcrop with her Peruvian love to create an organic farm and farm-to-table plates for visitors. On my various forays there I've eaten such dishes as Cuban lobster with coriander mayonnaise, suckling pig cooked in guava leaves and heart of palm, delicate Caribbean coleslaws, chive-sprinkled *moros y cristianos* (rice and beans) laced with jalapeño salsa, and the juices of offbeat fruits, from mamey to starfruit.

Over the past five years, Havana after dark has become more interesting. You no longer have to endure being serenaded with *Guantanamera* while drinking a Cuba Libre (unless you want to). Blurred lines between art and nightlife are part of the equation. It is forbidden to sell from galleries here, so instead you find cultural and non-profit spaces. Artists can request to rent disused spaces for 10 years at slashed rates – a pipe dream anywhere else. This tends to make them more generous and crowd-minded. Monumental artist Wilfredo Prieto occupies a former engine repair factory on the banks of the River Almendares. During the Biennale, and other events through the year, chefs, scientists, dancers, theatre troupes, industrial designers and architects have been known to descend. Plus, they have some wild parties. Arsenal Habana, a small space in the neighbourhood of Jesus Maria, an area “not touched by tourism or cultural institutions”, according to founder Sandra Pérez Lozano, provides a space for poetry, talks and parties, as well as regular exhibitions. The sine qua non of artistic houses of fun is the Fabrica del Arte Cubano (FAC). Part-funded by the Ministry of Culture, and conceived by rock god X Alfonso, it occupies an old tramway hangar near the River and is part gallery, part bar-restaurant space, part workshop and part labyrinthine club. Here you can catch gigs by the likes of the sultry Aretha Franklin of Cuba, Dayme Arocena, or jazz pianist Roberto Fonseca.

Other interesting spots include The Conga Room, a red-lit upstairs joint where *rumberos* brandish machetes and fill the space with the hypnotic rhythm of conga. “We are trying to recreate the energy of a Sunday rumba in a *solar* [a Cuban tenement],” says owner Claudia Ramos. Newer yet is Estudio 50, a factory space for audio-visual production that has evolved into a venue for art exhibitions, events and funky parties. A new favourite for a midnight nightcap is Michifu in Central Havana, a female-owned whitewashed space with an Ibiza vibe, impromptu piano singalongs and killer cocktails.

Most influential is the HAPE collective. Started by low-key Italian expat Giuseppe Scrufari Hedges along with Benjamin Gutiérrez, its atmospheric pop-up parties unfold in locations ranging from a Moorish folly in tropical gardens to cultural halls in Chinatown.

“Whoever has been to Havana knows that there is no lack of good music here,” Scrufari Hedges tells me, “but we felt there was need to create a space where hiphop, jazz, funk and electronic music could co-exist, blending the Cuban philosophy of the live jam – the *descarga* – with a contemporary take on club and DJ culture.”

The crème de la crème of Cuban artists moonlight at their parties, from jazz-trumpetist Yasek Manzano to drummer Yissy García, Gilles Peterson, singer and percussionist Brenda Navarrete, DJ Jigüé, Cuban rappers El Individuo and JD Asere, and Cimafunk, whose uplifting Afro-Cuban funk sound has gone on to win international acclaim.

“HAPE started as a close-knit community of friends and friends-of-friends,” says Giuseppe, “and expanded to become a really inclusive event that draws university students, musicians, artists, actors and dancers, and professionals alike. Despite the lack of internet access, Havana's word of mouth travels very quickly and whoever is in for a good party will be taken in for the ride.”

It's a ride anyone who visits Havana needs to be on. And the show must go on. ☺

*Cuba Private Travel* arranges tailored experiences, including those mentioned. Seven days in Havana staying at boutique hotel Loma del Angel, including visas, transfers and flights from Australia via Miami, costs from \$2400 per person based on two sharing. [Cubaprivatetravel.com](http://Cubaprivatetravel.com)

