

Caribbean

Cuba beyond Havana: sleepy towns and stunning beaches

The island is changing fast but the remote east remains untouched by mass tourism, finds **Lydia Bell**

A t a wineglass-shaped natural harbour called Bahía de Taco, we head out in a rowing boat in the early morning sun looking for manatees. At this time of day they like to munch on their breakfast algae. Agua de viva jellyfish glide beneath us. It's an idyllic, silent spot, the harbour's tiny entrance underscored by a reef. We peel off into the mangroves, a secret world of reflections and stillness, where you can hear the thunder of the surf beyond.

Here the locals come to catch a delicacy, *angulas* (baby eels), which I happen to know sell in Boisdale in London for £300 per plate. I make a note to try them that night in Baracoa but my thoughts are interrupted by a dark shadow in the water. A solitary manatee pokes his head out and looks me straight in the eye.

I am in the remote eastern corner of Cuba, at the edge of the sparsely inhabited 768sq km Humboldt National Park, one of the most important biospheres in the Caribbean basin. Named after Alejandro de Humboldt, a German who visited Cuba in 1801 and documented as much nature as he could manage, it has huge biological diversity.

It is a far cry from classic Cuban tourist sites such as Havana and Trinidad, which are awash with tourists and are likely to become even busier. President Obama's visit to Cuba this week was a further signal that Washington is relaxing its controls on the

socialist island; new flights are due to start and Americans are now allowed to organise their own 'educational' trips rather than going on the previous controlled, escorted variety. The message is clear — the gates are open.

For travellers seeking a more untouched Cuba, east is the way to go. This special corner, with the vibrant city of Santiago at its heart and stunning little-visited beaches, has plenty of rough Cuban edges as well as bountiful nature. Such is the virgin nature of Cuba's magical far east that only a few kilometres are the crow flies from where American soldiers are eating hamburgers at their McDonald's in Guantanamo Bay, there's a place called Caridad de los Indios, where pure-blood Taino still live and practise their ancestors' rituals (though otherwise living as regular Cubans).

Apart from trekking into the national park and manatee spotting, there are horses to ride, bikes to pedal into town, rivers in which to swim and a smorgasbord of beaches to discover. There are even a couple of locals willing to give you a surfing lesson. Just a few years ago, this was a cut-off spot with a dearth of infrastructure and entrepreneurialism. Now, things are developing. It's possible, with a clutch of tiny, English-speaking tourism outfits, to immerse oneself in nature in a guided way. Bird-watching can see up to 60 species of birds a day. These include parrots, blue warblers, palm crows, American kestrels, egrets, green herons, turkey vultures, Cuban hummingbirds, Cuban orioles, bullfinches, thrushes, kites, Cuban trogons, Cuban woodpeckers and kingfishers.

In these remote rural areas, the Cuban government's research-led ecological tourism wing, Flora & Fauna, is going from strength to strength. The organisation used to be about research but it soon twigged that its scientists should serve the increasing number of tourists, who craved

a specialised look at nature in the company of a PhD in botany who knew the medicinal use of every plant. You can hike to remote waterfalls off the well-beaten tourist track with these guys, as long as you don't mind sleeping in basic huts or with *campesino* (peasant) families.

We stay in Villa Maguana, a small collection of timber-built *casitas* on an idyllic palm-drenched beach. A small, tranquil village lies beyond Villa Maguana, with piglets prancing down its lanes and hedges fashioned from latex trees. On the main road to Baracoa from here, Cuban country life is a feast for the eyes: families walking with tiny babies under the shade of umbrellas; beautiful children riding bareback on horses; locals travelling by horse and cart; American kestrels swirling over royal palms, and cattle egrets perched on the backs of cattle amid banana groves; in a makeshift hairdresser's, someone is getting their head shaved. The road is banked with coral cliffs drowned in the vines of fig trees, their roots dangling, and lined with hedges coated in red dust and sparkling spiders' webs.

Cuba is a country of making do, but nowhere more so than here. A tiny percentage of people have a phone line in these villages, and hardly anyone has a mobile phone, although this is changing.

From Villa Maguana, you can arrange for Victor to take you to his house for an evening feast. He collects me, bearing a torch that doubles as a radio blaring reggaeton, and we walk down the starlit beach. We eat the best meal I've had in Cuba. Victor (or, more likely, a woman offstage taking none of the glory) produces a succession of passion fruit mojitos, pulpo in ink, tropical salads, plantain chips, *leche de coco* sauce, sweet and sour chicken, a variety of fish and barbecued pork.

Other heavenly episodes await. At the fishing village of Playa Manglito people bring their children to swim in the reef-protected waters teeming with lobster and octopus. You can eat the latter, too, at the beach-shack restaurant Tato, where we choose marinated marlin with *tostados* and salad and drink coconut water from coconuts. I get a head, neck and shoulder massage from a passing teenager, buy coconut oil from pushy local ladies, cuddle a six-month-old baby with painted toenails and watch a young girl take a pig on a lead down the beach.

Near by is the mouth of the Yumuri River, where legend says Taino committed mass suicide in the 16th century, throwing themselves off the towering cliffs after they were enslaved by the Spanish. From here you can take excursions downriver with Flora & Fauna to look for *rana ibérica* frogs, snakes, and, of course, all those birds. We visit the Toa River — which has 72 tributaries — and, in an experience I won't forget, swim down it at dusk. There are no villages on the river, although the water is drinkable and pure. Children travel downriver on rafts to school.

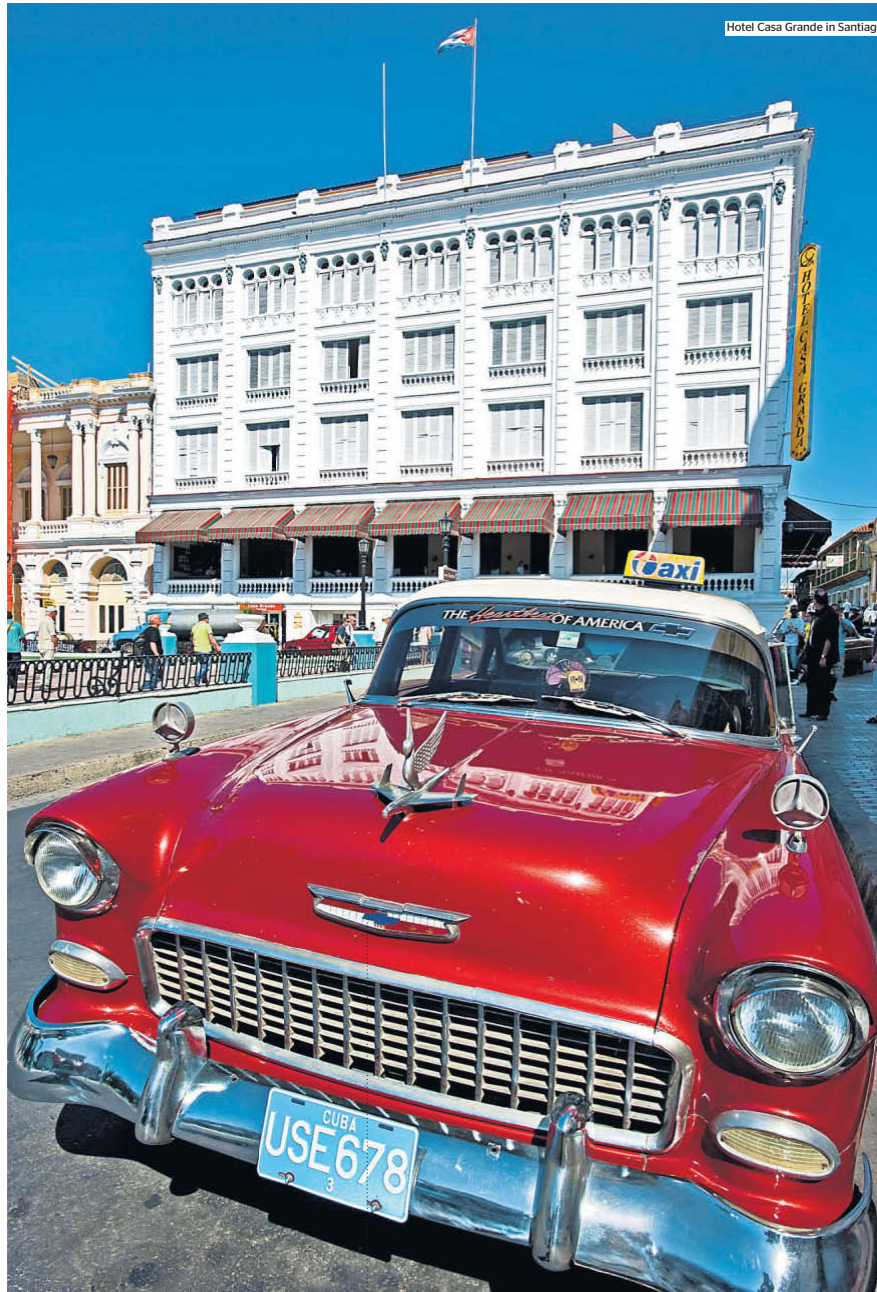
We have an evening out in the town of

Toa River, eastern Cuba



Musicians in Santiago

“The road is banked with coral cliffs drowned in the vines of fig trees”



Hotel Casa Grande in Santiago

ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES

Baracoa, and the liveliness of the cross-generational crowd is uplifting. People gather on the benches in the square to talk and drink. At the Casa de la Trova, music wafts through the grille and people hang out of open windows to look on, watch transfixed as a couple in their seventies dance slowly, intensely, as if for the first time.

Baracoa has changed. The last time I was here, the church was closed and falling in on itself, the buildings were on their last legs, and the town had all the exuberance of a funeral parlour. Now the church is rebuilt and its clock gleams in the coal-black night; people swarm the streets at all hours; buildings were spruced up for the Pope's visit. However, it's not just this: the town has a new power and hope in a more optimistic and entrepreneurial Cuba.

For fun, we have a salsa lesson on the terrace of the Casa de la Cultura with Janicea and her daughter. Later, I catch Janicea and her daughter dancing the best rumba I've seen, across the street. Crowds surge at the entrances to the building — Cuban and foreign — and in the cacophony of sound, hard-bodied men and women throw themselves around with the power and foreboding that characterises a good rumba.

I have to drag myself from Baracoa to get to Santiago, the beating heart of the east. It's not my first time in Baracoa either, and I am eager to investigate the changes. Once visited, the city is never forgotten. Its setting rivals many of the world's more famous metropolises, but Santiago has the feel of an overgrown country town. Sandwiched between the beauty of the Sierra Maestra and the glittering Caribbean, it's timeless magical at its core and tangibly different from Havana.

It's hotter, too, and hugely more humid, physically closer to Kingston, Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and culturally closer, too. The predominantly west African roots of the Santiagueros mean this city is more Afro-Cuban in its music and rituals, less in thrall to Spanish roots. Whatever the city's dilapidated, dusty and remote ambience suggests, Santiago has punched way above its weight in literature, architecture and politics (from here, Fidel, child of the east, grew up privileged amid poverty and launched the early stages of his revolution), but above all in music. Almost every Cuban genre was born out of these streets, which move to mysterious Yoruba, Bantu, and Haitian-inspired beats.

One night we join the raucous party on the top of the Hotel Casa Grande where we can see the whole city, starting with the bell towers of the beautiful Nuestra Señora de la Asunción. The band is Septeto Santiago, which won a Grammy a few years ago, but still plays live to a local audience every week.

Casa de las Tradiciones is the tiniest of cultural venues, an intimate old colonial home in the neighbourhood of Trovill, which lights up wildly during carnival, to

night it's quiet as our footsteps echo down the street and families sit on their doorsteps chatting in the balmy air. They are playing son cubano, and older couples dance gracefully against the backdrop of a huge painted canvas of Santiago, the city's patron saint.

Last year, the city celebrated its 500th anniversary and welcomed the Pope — and the streets were spruced up. Restoration is also nearing completion on the Hotel Encanto Imperial, from the state brand renowned for its sensitive colonial refurbishments. A few blocks from Cespedes Park, this 1915 building has been in a state of dereliction for two decades. Now the balconies, pilasters, pediment and arches of its beautiful façades have been tarted up and 39 spacious rooms have been carved out of its interiors. This is going to be the best hotel in town without doubt.

It's not ready for us, and we have opted to stay out of town in a *casa particular* (homestay) in Siboney, a beach town 12 miles east of Santiago at the foot of the Sierra Maestra. One of the best constructed 1950s beach house looks out on honey-coloured sun-kissed cliffs, thrashing seas and blessed sunsets; the walls are lined with 50-year-old knick-knacks and shells.

Siboney has its charms, but the scrappy beach is nothing special, so we wrap on a sailing yacht owned by Juan, a Santiaguero-dwelling Catalan who is the only person, foreign or Cuban, who has so far had the patience and tenacity to battle bureaucracy and lack of infrastructure to charter a boat on these waters. His *Piligrina* is allowed to run tourists out of Santiago to the tropical archipelagos of the Jardines de la Reina, for those in need of a slug of castaway Caribbean. Otherwise, Juan can run you up the coast for a couple of days of sailing, fishing, diving and swimming. This is deep sea — six miles from the coast you can reach a depth of 8,600m in some places. Whales from Newfoundland migrate on this route, and there are realms of marlin and tuna. We sail up the coast for a day and a night, to a quiet village with a tiny reef, gorge on Catalan lamb pie and a lobster fricassee, and sleep through a small earthquake that happens in the dead of night.

Back on dry land, we decide to visit a farm about seven miles outside Santiago to ride at Pedro's *fincas* in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra. Pedro is also a horse whisperer, and works with disabled children and horses. From here, he sometimes takes visitors on a five-hour back to the village of El Cobre to visit the famous statue of Cuba's beloved patroness, Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre, in the little basilica there. Believers flock here from around Cuba to solicit her help.

Trotting peacefully down a rutted country lane in the late afternoon sun, admiring Pedro's spurs, I reflect that I might not have got as far as El Cobre, but that this visit to the soul-affirming Oriente has been a pilgrimage of sorts.

Need to know

Lydia Bell was a guest of Black Tomato (020 7426 9888, blacktomato.com), which has seven-night tailor-made trips to eastern Cuba from £3,500pp, with Heathrow-Havana flights, accommodation, internal flights, transfers and tours. Alternatively, Kuoni (01306 747008, kuoni.co.uk) has 12 nights on a mostly half-board basis on its Enchanting Cuba escorted tour, with accommodation and flights, from £2,673pp, departing on October 27.

