

BAZAAR

EDITED BY
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ESCAPE

EVENING GLOW
The enduring appeal
of Havana's laid-back
easy living

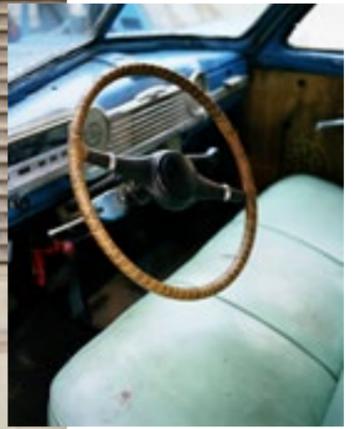
Golden days

Discover the real Cuba, with its timeless classic cars, Fifties allure and idyllic Caribbean beaches. **Plus** the Med's finest Riviera resorts for a weekend of old-school glamour, and Sienna Miller's perfect Mexican hideaway

CUBA LIBRE
Clockwise from far left: a trombonist practising for a concert in Havana. A girl in flamenco dress. The inside of an old American car. A pool cut into the rocks on the Malecón. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara books for sale. Sheets hanging out to dry in an empty building. A woman by her home



COASTAL CRUISING
A car on the Malecón in Havana, the esplanade that runs along the coast



Viva la Cuba

As change slowly comes to the Caribbean's Communist stronghold, **TIM LOTT** explores the old Cuba - the crumbling colonial architecture, the 1950s American automobiles and Hemingway's house as he left it - and finds an island of uplifting surprises

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIEN CAPMEIL



It seemed implausible that the Spanish colonial architecture, so worm-eaten and weather-beaten, could still be standing – yet its grainy decay conceals new growth



PRESERVED IN TIME
Left: the staircase leading to the Paladar La Guarida restaurant. Above: flowers for sale

has as much to do with the food as the *Santería* offerings at the entrance. Here, honey, dolls, candles and keys are left as tributes to the *Orishas* (native spirits). *Santería* – a cross-fertilisation of Christianity and Afro-Cuban animism – is the traditional spiritual practice.

Less spiritual pursuits include dancing, music and a kind of cash-propelled flirting. I went after midnight to the Casa de la Música in Havana Centro to experience some live music, from the band Bamboleo, a roaring 12-piece Cubano outfit.

It was a scene. Quite apart from the music tearing at your eardrums, there is the sheer feral nature of the dancing that is going on wall-to-wall: snaking, writhing and almost shockingly uninhibited. An attractive woman, uninvited, thrust her hands up my shirt and fondled my chest. Sadly, the attraction was purely commercial.

I spent a few days outside Havana, renting a rust-coloured open-top 1952 Oldsmobile (Cuba is a vast museum of preserved 1950s American classic autos), and visiting the Ernest Hemingway museum, Finca la Vigía. Here you can see (through the open windows, since no one is allowed inside) Hemingway's typewriter, art collection, library of 9,000 books and stuffed animal heads. My favourite sight was his bathroom: adjacent to a shelf of pickled reptiles, a jar of lion fat and a bottle of anti-dandruff lotion, he has religiously scrawled his weight of every day on the wall. The final inscription showed a staggering 103 kilos.

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Visiting the Zapata peninsula, south-east of Havana, I was in a brand-new Audi, on a tour run by Esencia – part of a new wave of Cuban tour operators taking advantage of the liberalised economy and employing privately licensed guides instead of Communist Party apparatchiks.

They took me snorkelling in the choppy waters of the Bay of Pigs, where Romy, our driver, one of the new breed of 'Yummies' (Young Upwardly Mobile Marxists), took us to a rudimentary café near the Cueva de los Peces, La Casa del Pescador, little more than a shack on the borders of a vast eco-reserve, the Gran Parque Natural Montemar.

For a few pesos, I ate seafood that was better than anything I have tasted in five-star European restaurants. The barbecued crocodile was as good as the lobster, probably because they roam wild here – along with tree-rats, which weren't on the menu.

In Cienfuegos, I saw the palatial colonial beach houses on the waterfront that are now coming available for rent. Since the sale of houses was legalised last year, property is being made good and rented out. With staff included, the whole house was no more than 200 pesos (about £125) a night.

There was a yacht marina, botanical gardens, waterfalls and beaches. Parts of Cuba are becoming less like a grim Eastern Bloc enclave and more akin to a Caribbean Saint-Tropez. Most striking of all was the early-20th-century Palacio de Valle, the 'Cuban Taj Mahal', with its mix of art deco style, Moorish and Mughal architecture and Egyptian decoration. Like so many parts of Cuba, it is being renovated.

From Cienfuegos, I went to the city of Trinidad, where songbirds sing in cages bolted to outside walls. I haplessly watched open-air salsa dancing in the Plaza Mayor; I carefully tapped my foot, out of time.

There's no advertising, and very little shopping in Cuba, but in Trinidad there are good ceramics, folk art, fine linens and rare black-coral jewellery (again illegal, since it is a threatened flora).

At the Playa Ancón outside Trinidad I drank coco locos (green coconuts filled with rum) on the sprawling sands. The shadow of the glowering, municipal-style, state-run Hotel Ancón spread out over the free play of the waves. The tide was going out, and the sun sinking. Soon, the shadow would recede and disappear altogether.

Cuba's new dawn is arriving and with it, much is emerging and much will become extinct. Maybe the twilight here will be the most beautiful time of all. □

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REST OF THE BEST: Colonial boltholes



Best for NATURE-LOVERS

El Colibrí, Argentina
This family-run ranch sprawls over acres of lush Córdoba fields and sun-drenched lakes. Wake up to the sound of hummingbirds, and eat breakfast on the porch as wild horses gallop across the plain. The house itself is charming, with historical relics adorning the hall.
From £565 a room a night full board in a Junior Suite, with Global Artichoke (01803 290958; www.globalartichoke.com).



Best for TRANQUILLITY

El Convento, Guatemala
The original architecture of this former monastery, in the shadows of three volcanoes, is magnificent: candlelit archways, stone fountains and lilac orchids evoke a sense of the town of Antigua's colonial history. Visit the baroque churches and feast on *helado* in Parque Central.
Three nights in a junior suite, from £395 a person, including private transfers from Guatemala City, with Exsus (020 7337 9010; www.exsus.com).



Luxe for LESS

Best for PRIVACY

Casa de Sierra Nevada, Mexico
Nestled on a cobbled street in San Miguel de Allende, this hotel is a hillside idyll. Sweeping arches and luscious vines frame the six 16th-century villas, where guests can enjoy the serenity. The hotel's cool decor is a nod to the traditional Mexican palette, and the chic bar terrace is the perfect setting to take in the panoramic view of the town.
From £138 a person a night, with Kivi Collection (020 3318 9541; www.kivicollection.com).



Best for INTERIOR DESIGN

Villa Bahia, Brazil
Each room in the renovated colonial building has a bespoke theme, based on the various countries visited by the original Portuguese explorers. Relax in the heat at the rooftop swimming pool, or visit the famous Barraca do Francês beach, less than an hour away.
Three nights in a Standard Room, from £395 a person B&B, including transfers, with Original Travel (020 7978 7333; www.originaltravel.co.uk).



Best for VIEWS

Casa Gangotena, Ecuador
The grand Gangotena overlooks the sublime spires and bell-towers of Quito's Plaza de San Francisco. The sumptuous rooms boast towering ceilings and handpainted corning. Lose yourself in the vast library, or use the hotel as a base for excursions to the Andes, Amazon and the Galápagos Islands.
Three nights in a Luxury Room, from £470 a person B&B, including transfers, with Original Travel (020 7978 7333; www.originaltravel.co.uk).

As the taxi ferried me into Havana, we pulled up level with a battered coach, cruising at about 50mph. Four cyclists were strung out in a chain behind it, the front rider grasping at a scrap of its chassis, the other three holding onto one another's frames for dear life.

As I watched, the lead cyclist lost his grip. The four cyclists were spread-eagled and tumbled along the road, still travelling at 50mph, cars behind struggling to avoid crushing them under their wheels.

My taxi driver merely shrugged. Tagging the coaches was illegal. But Cuba is a country where, as one guide told me: 'You've broken three laws before you've had breakfast.'

One of the last old-style Communist regimes – but moving to a more free-market economy – Cuba is girdled with legislation for every eventuality. Until recently, tourists were not even allowed to talk to citizens, and locals were not admitted to hotels. But the rules have always been, to an extent, optional.

The ethos of 'nod and wink' was apparent within a few hours of checking in to my

five-star, state-run hotel. My travelling companion was offered black-market rum and cigars and 'a girl of any size, age or shape in your bed when you get home tonight'.

I clearly looked too respectable to be offered concubines. I took an early walk round the streets of old Havana instead, which has the quality of a Max Ernst painting – perhaps *Europe After the Rain*: shattered brickwork, stained plaster spidered with cracks, but glowingly beautiful.

It seemed implausible that some of the Spanish colonial architecture, so worm-eaten and weather-beaten, could still be standing. Yet its grainy decay conceals new growth: amid the ubiquitous sellers of Che Guevara memorabilia, there are now branches of Benetton and Mango.

Pleasures of the flesh are not hard to come by in Havana. The food – by reputation awful – is unexpectedly good, especially at the city's many *paladares* (privately owned restaurants). As well as the elegant Paladar La Guarida, on the second floor of a bombed-out shell of a building, I visited Paladar La Esperanza. Perhaps its success