



Havana

# 9 Havana

## Captivating retro soul



BY LYDIA BELL

Along the seafront of Havana, Cadillacs and Buicks are saltwater-sprayed by arching waves. Doe-eyed neighbourhood beauties congregate on street corners for a daily gossip, curlers in; men play dominoes on cardboard-box tables; their children scoot on pieces of plywood down rutted streets of ruined Spanish beauty. There is always something to look at in Havana.

After 50 years of revolution, Cuba clings to communism by the skin of its teeth. So, the old cliché goes, go now, before the new revolution happens, and all this retro soul slides away.

A slew of world-class hotel and golf projects will up the ante on Cuba's faded scene. The Carbonera Club ([www.thecarboneraclub.com](http://www.thecarboneraclub.com)) in nearby Varadero is the pick of the bunch. And, as the renting of whole villas to foreigners has been legalised, Cuba-travel specialist Esencia has launched a villa-rental service: pick from 1950s modernist boltholes or colonial pads.

Hotel Palacio del Marqués de San Felipe y Santiago de Bejucal, on lovely Plaza San Francisco de Asis, is the latest hotel to be restored by the Habaguanex chain. But if you want to be assured of a decent thread count, select the Saratoga, which beautifully blends modernity and colonial character.

*Seven nights at the Saratoga, from £1,399 a person B&B, including flights and transfers, with Esencia (01481 714898; [www.esenciaexperiences.com](http://www.esenciaexperiences.com)).*