

Cuban day spas: plucked, primped and preened – Havana style

Behind the crumbling baroque facades, Habaneros are happily getting their faces steam-cleaned in the new day spas that have sprung up. Our writer gets a makeover

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Arte Corte day spa. Photograph: Mark Read

I am reclining in an 18th-century barber's chair in suburban Havana, having my blackheads ferociously attended to by Rafael Orama, Cuba's foremost facialist (most famous client: Susan Sarandon). This quiet, foliage-drenched street in sleepy Nuevo Vedado is a 20-minute cab ride from downtown Havana, but it's worth it for Orama's expert, old-school facials.

When I arrive at Salon Madrid (Calle Linea e/J, +537 832 0123), there are two people waiting on his veranda – both men. Orama has been doing this for 20 years, and has it down to a fine art. What you get here is a deep *limpieza* – cleaning – using meticulously kept equipment, some of it dating from the 1950s (the barber's chair is the only colonial relic).

In a darkened room, to a soundtrack of 1980s electronica, Orama steams my face, deep cleans it with ethanol, goes to war on blocked pores, tweezes my eyebrows and tries to

tint them (he is only put off after being told three times that I had them done the day before). Then he applies a sulphur mask – the ingredients for which he collects by hand from the seabed at Havana's Playas del Este – vigorously massages my face, blasts it with prickles of electricity and kneads it with a facial rolling pin. And ¡hola! – I am born again and return blinking into the Havana sun, my face rejuvenated and tingling.

About an hour before any flight to Havana lands, the Cuban women on board can be spotted heading off to the loos to effect a transformation more mind-blowing than anything you may have seen on *Stars in Their Eyes*. They emerge in midriff-revealing tops, skin-tight jeans, killer heels, big hair, full make-up, and with gold chains snaking into their décolletage, leaving the British women feeling tetchy about their inferior grooming before the plane has even touched down.

Cubans – both men and women – are incorrigibly vain and will spend a considerable proportion of their income on preening. So when Raúl Castro loosened regulations governing private enterprise in 2010, the idea of the day spa took off with a vengeance. These places' main market is newly wealthy Cubans, but they are a novel way for visitors to get under the skin of this city, which treats matters of beauty with deadly seriousness.



A barber at work at

Arte Corte. Photograph: Mark Read

At Calle A (+537 202 1033), one of the best new parlours in Havana, carved out of a 1950s apartment, I have booked a scrub and a mani-pedi. The entrepreneurial owner travels to Mexico to buy products and equipment. For my 10CUC (£6) scrub, I am presented with a microscopic towel – there's no room in Cuba for body anxiety. The chatty therapist trowels me with honey, butter, olive oil and olive seeds. As she works, she gives me the rundown on the most popular programme – 10 anti-cellulite treatments (using a laser device and massage) for about £60.

Invigorated, I migrate to the nail and beauty area, with its red leather swivel chairs and a white sofa. Enjoying a free cappuccino, I get a manicure with shellac polish – which sets like concrete on your talons, is harder to chip than Teflon, lasts 21 days, and has just hit the Cuban salons. She also persuades me to have a couple of extra treatments. When I comment that the other therapist removed my foundation, she makes my face up again, gratis.

At O2 (5 Calle 26, Nuevo Vedado, +537 883 1663), a day spa, hair salon and gym run from a suburban home, the front lawn has been converted into a cafe and the all-white

reception area is jazzed up with colourful colonial-style rocking chairs. In the hairdressing salon, rows of women in foils are flicking through magazines. I head upstairs to the treatment room, where I enjoy a "relaxation massage". The friendly masseuse fancies a chat: drifting into semi-unconsciousness is not an option. My only complaint is the volume of dance music from the spinning class next door.

At Arte Corte (10 Calle Aguiar, +537 861 0202) in Old Havana, the setting is as important as the act of hairdressing itself: Gilberto Valladares (known to everyone as Papito) has surrounded himself with antique scissors, combs, brushes and other vintage male-grooming paraphernalia, and sits his customers in a century-old chair. Women come, too, for manicures, pedicures, facials and peels, cuts, colours and hair extensions.

If you fancy a day-spa treatment in Havana, go with an open mind. Cuba is not a globalised country, so treatments are delivered the same way as everything else: bluntly, but cheerily. Don't be offended if they ask searching questions about your tummy muscles, or suggest ways in which you could make yourself more attractive – such as "that fringe does nothing for you", or "you could do with losing 10 kilos". (It probably helps if you can't speak Spanish.)

If you're OK with this, and with the lack of ambient music and Tibetan singing bowls, a Cuba day spa offers an expert treat (stick to beauty over wellbeing, which they don't really take seriously, yet) at a fraction of the price you'd pay elsewhere, and with a lovely massage-table-side manner to boot.

- *The trip was provided by Esencia Experiences (esenciaexperiences.com), which offers seven days at a casa particular (homestay), transfers, visas, and help with arranging treatments and consultations (but not the cost of the treatments) from £789 for seven nights, not including flights. Virgin Atlantic (virgin-atlantic.com, 0844 209 7777) flies twice weekly from Gatwick to Havana from £544 return*



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