

VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN!

*Bad hotels, lousy food, clueless service and hassle all the way — Cuba used to be a rum deal for travellers. But the sunshine socialist state is changing, says **John Arlidge***



Let me introduce you to a man who is good to know. His name is Johnny Considine, and he is going to sort out your next holiday and possibly your next property investment. Not in Ireland, where he's from, but in that other small, culturally rich country that has exercised an extraordinary, powerful hold on the world's imagination. Cuba.

Ah, Cuba. Great music, cigars, ruined grandeur, cars. But the hotels are overpriced and lousy, the food is all leathery pork that tastes like warmed-up sneakers and it's hassle all the way. Well, not any more. The sunshine socialist state has changed. Take getting there. In the past, the only way to travel to Havana was to pack a picnic and board an ancient Soviet-built Air Cubana jet at Stansted airport. You flew to Gander in Canada to refuel and then on to Varadero, where a man with an ageing Buick would drive you to the capital in return for a fistful of hard currency. If you were lucky.

These days, Virgin Atlantic flies direct to Havana up to three times a week from Gatwick. Once you land at Jose

Marti airport, Considine is there to meet you with a VIP pass. (In the new Cuba, some travellers are more equal than others.) He ushers you through immigration to the VIP arrivals lounge for a vicious espresso, while one of his band of merry men and women retrieves your luggage and takes it through customs. Then it's straight into a new Audi and off along deserted roads into town.

All the top hotels are still state-run, but they are getting better. The Nacional, where Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner honeymooned, has pride of place atop the Malecon, Havana's seafront promenade. Stay there if big skies are your thing. The Saratoga, Havana's first boutique-style hotel, is in gritty downtown and has a great rooftop swimming pool, where you can get a mojito and a massage. For my peso, the best bet is the Santa Isabel in old Havana. The converted home of a fabulously wealthy colonial Spanish count has vast rooms with antique furniture and large terraces. It's right on the Malecon, too.

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Another option is hiring a villa. Considine's firm, Esencia, will find you a place. Considine's chefs and cleaners will take care of you during the day, but give them the night off — or ask them to babysit if you have kids in tow — as Havana now has some of the best restaurants in the world. Don't take my word for it. Ask Sarah Saunders. She runs a British company called Taste Adventures (tasteadventures.com) and has spent a decade getting to know all the best chefs in Havana whom the government now allows to run *paladares*, home-based restaurants. She's about to launch a culinary institute in Havana 'before the big American corporations get in and ruin everything'.

Saunders takes me to Santi on the outskirts of town. It's a shack, with no phone, doesn't take bookings, and there's only one thing on the menu. But it's worth turning up and waiting because that thing is the best sashimi you'll ever eat. Each morning Santi, the fisherman who owns the shack, catches tuna and Spanish mackerel. He kills and guts the fish just minutes before he serves it, with a little olive oil, coriander and soy. Eat it and weep, Nobu.

The restaurants are so good that it can be hard to get a table, but Considine knows all the right numbers to call. One day at 4pm I asked him for an 8.30pm reservation at La Guarida, Cuba's best-known *paladar*, run by Enrique



Nunez. He got it. Other great places Considine will get you into are Habana Chef, Le Chansonnier, La Galeria and Vistamar. Don't expect fine wine at any of the *paladares* — you can bring your own to most places, while the Havana Club cocktails taste all the better for being in Cuba.

Then there are the cigars. They get better and better, and prices are 70 per cent lower than in London. Eddie Sahakian, who runs Davidoff in St James's with his father Edward and is about to launch a spiffy new smoking lounge in Knightsbridge, suggests two new releases to try. So I do. The new H Upmann Royal Robusto has a satisfying ring gauge (diameter) and is a rich, dark colour but is a mild, winey 'after-lunch' smoke. For the evenings, when the 30-year-old Máximo Extra Añejo rum comes out, there's the Cohiba Behike 52 for beginners or the 56 for experts. It's a big, fat stick but has a subtle, nutty flavour.

Of course, Cuba is not all about Havana. You can't visit the Caribbean without going to the beach. The good news is that new roads and new cars mean the sand and the big blue are only twenty minutes from the city centre. Considine directs me to Tarara, near the Playas del Este. Back in the day when the roubles flowed freely into Cuba, it was the Hamptons of Havana, a gated community where the communist elite went to relax. Now it's the most oddly compelling beach resort you can imagine. The pool bars serve up cold beer and hot girls and the Bounty ad beach shacks serve a mean lobster with salad. It's the place, the taste of modern Cuba.

If you like it as much as Considine does, he can even help you buy a slice of it. Under the government's reforms, foreigners may soon be able to buy villas. Esencia has detailed plans for the first purpose-built 550-acre golf resort with 900 homes at Carbonera, a cliff-top 70 miles east of the capital. It has signed up some big names — Aman resorts, Sir Terence Conran. Given the Cuban government's nasty habit of confiscating other people's 'stuff', any investment would be risky. But with the government opening up to a little light capitalism — it now encourages instead of bans small business — now might, just, might be the time. *f*

Esencia provides seven-day vacations visiting Havana and Trinidad from £1,999 per person sharing, incl. flights, visas, VIP arrival and five-star hotel (B&B). 07793 451652; esenciaexperiences.com. Virgin Atlantic flies up to three times weekly to Havana from Gatwick. 0844 209 2770; virginatlantic.com

