



## 48 Hours In: Havana

Explore independent restaurants, guesthouses and galleries in the Cuban capital, says Claire Boobbyer

Claire Boobbyer

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### Travel essentials

#### Why go now?

The Cuban capital is basking in deliciously comfortable tropical temperatures and its rich cultural calendar is in full swing. This winter sees Havana's first World Music Festival taking place at the Circulo Social José Antonio Echeverría (1) from 7-8 February ([havanaworldmusic.com](http://havanaworldmusic.com)), while the Love & Peace Havana Festival will be staged at the new Fábrica de Arte Cubano (2) from 5-8 March ([lovepeace.havana.com](http://lovepeace.havana.com)).

#### Touch down

The only airline with direct flights from the UK to Havana is Virgin Atlantic (0844 2092 770; [virginatlantic.com](http://virginatlantic.com)), which flies twice weekly from Gatwick from £670 return.

Modern taxis line up to take visitors from José Martí airport to Havana for a fixed fare of CUC25 (£15) to Old Havana and CUC20 (£12) to Vedado.

#### Get your bearings

Havana is made up of four separate districts of main interest to the visitor. Old Havana, next to the bay, is the historic Spanish colonial core of the city, with the majority of sights, hotels and state-run restaurants.

West of the Old Town is Centro, a residential area, home to Chinatown and some outstanding private restaurants, or paladares. Further west, Vedado is leafy, arty and shines with some of Havana's best bars, clubs and paladares, as well as art galleries and museums.

Miramar, west of the Almendares River, is a smart suburb of embassies, restaurants, bars and attractions. They're all linked by the Malecón, Havana's serpentine seawall.

The Habana Bus Tour (9am-9pm daily; CUC5/£3 per day) will get you around the sights if time is short. There are three routes, the shortest of which departs from Alameda de Paula (3).

Much more fun is to hire a classic gleaming American convertible with a driver. Enrique Jiménez of Gran Car (00 53 5 295 0956) comes highly recommended, with tours costing around CUC25 (£15) per car per hour.

#### Check in

Hotel Terral (4) at the Malecón corner of Calle Lealtad (0808 238 0042; [habaguanexhotels.com](http://habaguanexhotels.com)) has modern, minimalist rooms with floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the Florida Straits. The breakfasts – without limits – are superb and guests receive discount vouchers for museums and restaurants in Old Havana. Doubles start at CUC130 (£79), including breakfast.

Five blocks from the Malecón, Casa Concordia (5), on the corner of Calle Concordia and San Nicolas (00 53 5 254 5240; [casaconcordia.promotemyplace.com](http://casaconcordia.promotemyplace.com)), is a new, handsome three-bedroom independent apartment, furnished and decorated by architects. Rental starts at US\$1,680 (£1,027) per week; double room rates from US\$75 (£46).

Casa 1932 (6) is an elegant Cuban homestay (casa particular) at Calle Campanario 63 bajos, between San Lázaro and Lagunas, embellished with antiques and Art Deco flourishes (00 53 7 863 6203; [casahabana.net](http://casahabana.net)). Double rooms start at CUC30 (£18), including breakfast.

### HavanaDay one

#### Take a hike

Start at the historic Plaza de Armas (7), dominated by the muscular 16th-century Castillo de la Fuerza and the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales. Amble west down Old Havana's main shopping street, Calle Obispo, to the salmon-pink Hotel Ambos Mundos (8) (Ernest Hemingway lived in room 511). Detour south to the Maqueta de La Habana Vieja (9) at Calle Mercaderes 114 – a beautiful scale model of the city. Head back to Obispo and north along Calle San Ignacio to the spectacular Plaza de la Catedral (10).

All the sculpted stone glory and decorative flourishes of Spanish colonial architecture are contained in this square: the Cuban Baroque cathedral; the Palacio de Lombillo with its stained-glass, half-moon windows (mediopuntos); the El Patio restaurant in the Casa del Marqués de Aguas Claras, perfect for a refreshing mojito; and the magnificent Museo de Arte Colonial (00 53 7 862 6440; [www.ohch.cu](http://www.ohch.cu); 9am-6.30pm daily; CUC2/£1.20).

#### Lunch on the run

El Chanchullero (11) in Plaza del Cristo (00 53 7 861 0915; [el-chanchullero.com](http://el-chanchullero.com)) is a tapas bar serving tasty platters of garlic shrimp and chicken skewers.

#### Cultural afternoon

Head first to Havana's avant-garde galleries. Galeria Habana (12) is at Calle Línea between E and F in Vedado (00 53 7 832 7101; 10am-5pm Monday-Friday, until 1pm Saturday); while four young artists occupy a stunning building (13) in Miramar ([cubartspace7y60.com](http://cubartspace7y60.com); by appointment only). One of Cuba's most exciting contemporary artists, Esterio Segura, runs an open studio (14) at Calzada del Cerro 1313 by way of appointment (00 53 7 870 5431).

For another snapshot, opt for a guided photography tour with art curator Sussette Martínez (sussem@gmail.com; from CUC40/£25) taking in the collection of Alberto Korda and contemporary artists' studios.

#### An aperitif

For a bird's-eye view of the entire historic Malecón, head for an early evening cocktail at La Torre (15), the 33rd floor bar of the Focsa building in Vedado at Calle 17 between M and N (00 53 7 832 2451). For beautiful views of the white Capitol (16) building and Prado boulevard, head to the rooftop pool of the Hotel Saratoga (17) at the Prado 603 corner of Dragones (00 53 7 868 1000; [www.hotel-saratoga.com](http://www.hotel-saratoga.com)).

Meanwhile, Musician X Alfonso's new multimedia venue, Fábrica de Arte (2) is at Calle 26 number 61 between 11 and 13 in Vedado. It opens from 6pm to 6am and has a small bar serving drinks and snacks.

#### Dining with the locals

Starbien (18) is a paladar at Calle 29 number 205 between B and C (00 53 7 830 0711; closed Sunday) that's garnered rave reviews for innovative dishes served in the garden of its Vedado mansion.

Riomar (19) at 3ra y Final number 11, La Puntilla in Miramar (00 53 7209 4838) is a stylish paladar with waterfront views.

To eat with the locals, try the Cuban Street Food Experience with Tanja Buwalda ([thecubanfoodblog.com](http://thecubanfoodblog.com)) who will talk you through Cuba's culinary history ([esenciaexperien.ces.com](http://esenciaexperien.ces.com); £85pp).



### **Day two**

#### **Sunday morning: go to church**

Mass at the Cuban Baroque Cathedral (10) in La Habana Vieja is held at 10.30am on Sundays. Cuba's other religion is rumba. On Sundays from 11am in Callejón de Hamel (20), throw some moves with the crowds, as exciting percussion rhythms thunder throughout the mural-decorated alley between Calle Aramburu and Calle Hospital in Centro Habana.

#### **Out to brunch**

La Imprenta (21), in a restored printing press building at Calle Mercaderes 208, is a good state-run restaurant in Old Havana serving up ceviche, sandwiches and tapas from 11am.

#### **Window shopping**

The daily Plaza de Armas (7) book and curios market is perfect browsing ground. Posters and souvenirs can be bought at the Museo de Bellas Artes shop (22) at Calle Trocadero between Zulueta and Monserrate (closes 2pm Sundays). Head to the Hotel Conde de Villanueva at Calle Mercaderes for your authentic smokes at the on-site La Casa del Habano (23).

#### **Take a ride**

Mastering how to hail the collective classic car taxis (almendrones) that follow set routes in the city is a must.

From the corner of Calle Neptuno and Consulado (24) in Centro, take a classic car out to Vedado via Calle Línea or Avenida 23 for 10 local Cuban pesos (10 CUP/25p). Common routes go via Avenida 3 in Miramar ("por tercera") or by Avenida 31 ("por treinta y uno").

#### **Walk in the park**

Walk among the illustrious dead at the Cementerio San Cristóbal (25) at Avenida Zapata and Calle 12 in Vedado (CUC5/ £3). The guided tour (CUC1/60p) will show you the highlights, but also ask to see the exquisite gold mosaic mural by René Portocarrero inside the tomb of the Raúl de Zárrega family.

#### **Icing on the cake**

Havana isn't all mojitos and daiquiris. The Factoría Plaza Vieja (26) in the Old Town on Calle San Ignacio (00 537 866 4453) is a drinking hotspot where beer is brewed on the premises.

For local flavour, head to the Malecón from dusk with a bottle of rum, to meet hundreds of locals flirting, fishing and lolling about on what is colloquially called "Havana's sofa".