

# Cuba: at home on another planet

**There's a lot more to Cuba than Communism, old Chevrolets and Caribbean beach resorts. Ian Henderson finds out how sixty years of being determinedly different has created a parallel future.**



*The untouched Spanish colonial town of Trinidad*

*By Ian Henderson, The Telegraph*  
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An island close to one of the world's giant economies. A proud history of seafaring, war and extravagant wealth. A defiantly idiosyncratic currency system. A people noted for dogged determination to do things their way. Yes, Britain is very much like Cuba.

Maybe that's why, despite being so very different, it's an easy place to feel at home. The sense of entering a parallel future, familiar yet strange, begins right outside the airport terminal. Cuba took a determinedly different path in 1959, when clocks stopped in the world of technology and economic progress and started in another where vast American cars still rule the roads, their drivers smoking cigars out of rolled-down windows; Che Guevara reminds us to choose "Socialism or Death" in faded paint on a concrete wall; families in bright clothes crowd onto buses, bicycles and horsedrawn carts under Caribbean sunshine. If my son and I had been on a Cuban cliché-ticking mission we could have turned round and come straight home.



Avoiding the clichés isn't easy. Government internet and currency restrictions make finding and booking places to stay difficult; a reminder why, before the digital age, we had travel agents. One such who has made Cuba a speciality is Johnny Considine, an Irishman living in Madrid working with British travel firm Esencia. Johnny put together a string of Cuba stories for us to follow that were fascinating, entertaining and sometimes moving. Having my son Harry along, fluent in Spanish and immersed in Latin American culture, helped us listen and understand them. The stories started with Hernan our driver, a compact ball of muscle behind a big smile who, Harry soon discovered, is a Cuban national jiu-jitsu champion and was worried about getting to Bogota for the PanAm tournament in a couple of weeks' time.



Hernan delivers us to our hotel, the Saratoga, which has an old-school comfortable feel. It's opposite the Capitolio (pictured above) and in strolling distance of Hemingway-era bars like La Floridita (pictured below). The streets are safe but poorly-lit at night, filled with the fumes of ancient motors. Down the wide Prado rambla is the Malecon sea wall

where fishermen, lovers and children meet and the old town itself, once the proudest port in the Americas. There we met the second of Johnny Considine's contacts, a retired architect and urbanista called Pedro Vasquez. He arrived in his battered Soviet-era Moskvich car - called Galileo after the astronomer's answer to the Inquisition as to whether the Earth was the centre of the Universe, "... still, it moves".



Pedro's encyclopaedic knowledge of the city, its buildings and its history was delivered with erudition and humour, in Spanish and English. We talked of Cuba's isolation and the feeling of a war being stubbornly fought after the enemy has long since lost interest – a war with only one side. Yet everywhere we had a joyous musical accompaniment – small bands played in squares, Cuban stars like Osmani Garcia spilled from TVs in bars. The music continued later that day when we got back in the car with Hernan and headed out past the disused smokestacks, Chinese-built oil rigs and roadside cowboys. He'd made us a couple of CDs – familiar son and mambo from the Buena Vista Social Club, through old-time stars like Bebo Valdes (who died the week before) to the latest reggaeton from Eddy K and Diciembre Bueno. Political comment is mild; 'Bumping on the Bus' is about overcrowded public transport (and sex), others sing of food shortages.

By far the biggest island in the Caribbean, Cuba has miles of unspoilt beaches, reefs, islands and lagoons to explore. Many of the passengers on the twice-weekly Virgin 747 flight (the only direct way from the UK to Cuba) head straight to the resort hotels of Varadero (pictured below) where the beaches are beautiful and the prices reasonable, at least compared with elsewhere in the Caribbean. Beach hotels tend to be concentrated in a few areas and are all at least part-owned by the government. That is changing and more international groups are building resorts that reach international standards, like the Paradisus on Varadero. It's good, but while the world has many beaches it has nowhere else like the rest of Cuba.



So we headed south to meet Ronel and Ivette at Playa Giron, who run a casa particular. These are family-run guest houses, approved by the State – often more welcoming than the state-owned hotels and with better food. Ivette made us local lobster and rice then we talked baseball and Barca over Cristal beer with the family. Playa Giron is better known as the Bay of Pigs where Castro's ramshackle army defeated a US-backed invasion and cemented their rule for the next fifty years. There's a small museum showing the carefully-folded shirts and ancient weapons of the revolutionaries next to their earnest, determined photographs opposite Ronel's scuba school – he used to be a military diver and can show you some fine cave, wreck and reef sites along the coast.

Near Playa Giron are the cenotes – inland lagoons connected to the sea, part of a long fault line in the limestone some of which can be navigated by braver divers. The most famous is the Cave of the Fishes, now a tourist spot with less than clear water and few fish, though more of the large blue crabs whose crushed brethren carpet the roads during migration season. Our tour took us through the old Miami style of Cienfuegos to the untouched Spanish colonial town of Trinidad (pictured below), where time stopped twice; once in 1898 when Spanish rule ended and again with the revolution in 1959. The bell tower can be seen a long way off, over what used to be hundreds of miles of sugar plantation but is now rough pasture and scrub. The town is a UNESCO heritage site for good reason, attracting coachloads of tourists; old houses filled with the finest crystal and porcelain bought with vast profits from sugar and slaves, crumbling frescos and elaborate facades lining narrow cobbled streets.



There we met the retired architect who runs the little museum, who showed his collection of antique door furniture. Yonelkis the 'Guide to Paradise' took us to a rooftop restaurant where all the plates carry the Real Madrid mark. Alejandro the fisherman shared his rum punch with us as we explored the mangroves and cayos off Playa Ancon. We hiked through the protected woodlands of Cienaga de Zapata watching flamingos, ate perfect mangoes hanging like Christmas decorations from roadside trees, got stared at by schoolchildren in perfectly-pressed maroon uniforms. We fixed tyres punctured by the defiantly-raised claws of migrating crabs. Then, somewhere outside Havana, we met up with Nelson Albuquerque and his cousin.

Nelson, university lecturer and expert on Ernest Hemingway, was going to show us around Finca Vigia where *The Old Man and the Sea* was written. A thrill in itself; but Nelson's cousin was at the wheel of the family treasure, a vast white Buick convertible 1959 with extravagant fins and red leather seats. In it we arrived at Hemingway's house, perfectly preserved since he killed himself in 1962 and full of the books and hunting trophies that filled his life. His fishing boat Pilar and the pool where Eve Gardner swam naked are still there; like the rest of Cuba, this feels like a place where the future has taken a different course. We headed down to Cojimar, the little port from where Hemingway fished and on the way back, Nelson's cousin let me drive the Buick. A dream of a day.

Running out of time, we were back in Havana in the company of art curator Sussette Martinez and four of the most interesting artists working in Cuba. Memo, who turned the Malecon sea wall into a tropical depression; Ibrahim, who finds beautiful animals in old maps; Douglas Perez and his Fifties-style Cuban utopias; and William Perez (no relation), whose heart is made of flowers. We stopped at an organoponico, one of the sustainable urban farms now supplying most of Havana's fresh food – organic and zero food miles. Beyonce and Jay-Z were staying in our hotel and ate at the same restaurant, Havana's current grooviest, La Guarida. We stopped for mojitos at La Floridita. We waited late into the night at Don Canejo nightclub for Diciembre Bueno to come on stage as ocean breakers crashed at our backs.

Havana felt connected, at the centre of things, as it must have done to Hemingway in the Fifties, before the clocks stopped. Cuba has stayed different by a determined effort of will, maintained for over sixty years. Its return to our world of 'wild capitalism', spoken of by many Cubans with understandable wariness, may seem inevitable. But for now, it feels at once as familiar as home and as different as another planet.

***The writer travelled with bespoke Cuba specialist Esencia Experiences ( 01481 714898; [esenciaexperiences.com](http://esenciaexperiences.com)) which offers a seven-day trip to Cuba taking in Havana, Trinidad, Cienfuegos and Varadero and includes stays at Havana's Saratoga Hotel, Trinidad's Iberostar and the Melia Princesa in Varadero and includes visa and private air conditioned transfers throughout. From £1,165 per person.***

### **Getting there**

Virgin operates direct scheduled flights twice a week from Heathrow to Havana: from £670 return ([virgin-atlantic.com](http://virgin-atlantic.com)).

Air France flies to Havana via Paris. There are a number of companies offering charter services to Havana or local airports such as Varadero or Holguin.

### **The inside track**

There are two currencies in Cuba, one for locals and one for foreigners. The rules are complicated – it's helpful to know them, and to make sure you have enough cash to exchange as there are few ATMs. Don't take dollars or US credit cards.

Check the latest rules on visas and currency, especially when leaving Cuba – get the order of check in, departure tax kiosk and exit visa wrong and you could be sent to the back of several long, winding queues. Don't forget to keep enough cash for the departure tax.

One of the most surprising – and to some, liberating – experiences is that there are few shops and less to shop for. There are tourist souvenirs aplenty, but you'll be disappointed if recreational shopping is your thing.

Do some serious research – paladars (private restaurants) and casas particulares (private B&Bs) come and go as fast as new government regulations.

If you like old cars, you'll love the club meets below the Hotel National and Capitolio on Saturday afternoons. Cars have to be 90 per cent original to join – which with no spare parts being imported is quite demanding.

### **Unusual driving hazards**

Crabs. The south coast teems with giant blue crabs which migrate between the sea and the lagoons inland. As thousands cross the road it's hard to avoid them, but a defiantly upraised claw will puncture a tyre.

Mosquito checkpoints. A serious-looking man with an extravagant moustache fires up what looks like a late Victorian portable rocket engine, which he uses to fill your car with thick black smoke. Stops insect migration, apparently.

### **What to do**

Talk to people. Many speak English but for Cubans travel is hard to arrange and harder to afford – discussion about the outside world is eagerly sought and easier with the increasingly liberal approach of Raul Castro.

Everything you've heard about Cuban music is true - immerse yourself before you go. It's rich, rewarding and an essential part of Cuban life – a little knowledge will open hearts as well as doors.

Go to Don Canejo for stars under the stars, Callejon de Hamel for rumba on Sunday afternoons, El Gato Tuerto for bolero until dawn. And who hasn't heard of Cabaret Tropicana?

Cuban cigars may be a cliché, but for good reason; staggeringly skilled craftspeople hand-make every single one to the highest standards, the way they were made in the Fifties.

Get some fresh air; Cuba's enlightened approach to conservation means plenty of open landscape to explore – like the Cienaga de Zapata for birdlife.

### **What to avoid**

By all means spend time on Cuba's beautiful beaches. But just remember that you're missing what makes this particular island so fascinating and unique. Try the old towns, the unspoiled landscapes, talking to people instead.

Don't expect things to work like they do elsewhere; Cuba isn't part of the digital world and the usual commodities are hard to come by. Keep an open mind and remember the challenges that Cubans face every day.

Going far off the beaten track can be hard without some careful planning – in remoter villages you could find yourself without anywhere to stay, without transport and no shops to buy supplies!

### **The best hotels**

#### **Casa Ivette y Ronel, Playa Giron £**

Welcoming, comfortable casa particular just inland from Playa Giron with dive school. (Camino Principal, Playa Giron; +53 45 984 129; [www.playagironcasa.com](http://www.playagironcasa.com); from £19 including breakfast)

#### **Iberostar Grand, Trinidad ££**

Traditional hotel within walking distance of all the sights in this historic town. (Calle

José Martí 262, Trinidad, Sancti Spiritu 98198-5808; [www.iberostar.com](http://www.iberostar.com); +53 41 996 070; from £59)

**Hotel Saratoga, Havana** £££

Stunning views from the rooftop pool and a perfect location make this the place to stay in Havana. (Paseo del Prado 603, esquina a Dragones, Havana 10200; [www.hotel-saratoga.com](http://www.hotel-saratoga.com); +53 7 868 1000; from £70)

**The best restaurants**

**Nao, Havana** £

Spanish-style paladar with traditional Cuban cooking in old Havana. (Obispo No 1 e/San Pedro y Baratillo, Havana; +53 7 867 3463)

**Vistamar, Havana** ££

Beautifully restored Fifties seafront house with pool, outstanding cooking. (Ave. 1ra, entre 22 y 24, Miramar, municipio Playa, Havana; +53 7 203 8328)

**La Guarida, Havana** £££

Havana's grooviest restaurant; cool people, new art, ancient building. (Concordia No.418 /Gervasio y Escobar, Havana; [www.laguarida.com](http://www.laguarida.com); +53 7 866 9047)