

how to spend it

TRAVEL / BEACH

Cuba's travel revolution

With sanctions lifting, a handful of enterprising travel fixers are paving a more nuanced and sophisticated path to Cuban life beyond the Cadillacs, salsa and cigar factories. Lydia Bell reports



Sharks abound on Axalon's diving trips in the Jardines de la Reina | Image: Greg Letcoeur

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What a monumental year 2016 was for Cuba on the international stage. Barack Obama visited, cutting the ribbon on a historic detente. The first US cruise liner since 1959 docked in Havana Bay. The Rolling Stones played to thousands at their debut gig there. Karl Lagerfeld took his Resort 2017 Chanel show to the island, bringing celebrity friends, a huddle of wide-eyed fashion press and a retinue of models (Fidel Castro's grandson also attended and the finale was a conga line). The eighth *Fast & Furious* became the first big-budget Hollywood movie to be shot there since the embargo. Even Kim Kardashian holidayed in Havana with husband Kanye, daughter North, son Saint and eccentric wardrobe in tow. All of which delivered an overpowering message: the gringo invasion has officially commenced.

In fact, Cuba has experienced a giddy surge in tourism (close to a 20 per cent jump) since the December 2014 peace effort with the United States was announced. This is not simply fuelled by American visits; there has been dramatic growth in tourism from other countries, as people flock to experience the "real" Cuba before it is "ruined" by commercialisation – and, some fear, re-Americanisation.



The 34m Jopaju can be chartered in Cuban waters through Camper & Nicholson's | Image: Camper & Nicholson's

The iconic experiences of Cuba are well documented. And it takes a cold soul to resist them: the juddering fleets of Cadillacs and Buicks; the salsa clubs with their charismatic timba orchestras; the fragrant, industrious **cigar factories** and rum distilleries; the bucolic mountains and plains, where the modern world seems not to have made a dent. A visit to Cuba is spent in large part simply wandering: along colonial ramparts, into high-baroque churches and through charmed squares – enchanting set pieces with fountains, street lamps and stone benches, where there is a high probability of being serenaded by itinerant yet virtuoso musicians. These days, though, the Unesco-listed streets of Havana Vieja have become the cash cow, to be milked within an inch of their life. You will be sharing their beauty with a preponderance of mojito-quaffing, **Cohiba-toting** fellow travellers.

Are there any benefits to this new openness? Actually, the answer is yes. A more nuanced and personal way of engaging with Cubans is evolving beyond the expected ballet nights, vintage car jaunts, rumba sessions and smoky jazz cabarets. “The quality of experience that you can have now in Cuba is top-notch,” says Johnny Considine, founder of Cuba Private Travel. “If you’re interested in Afrocentrism, you can meet with a respected historian, a key member of Cuba’s established Latin hip-hop movement or a grassroots activist working on gender empowerment for young black females in the *barrio*. If you’re interested in food provenance” – **Havana has gone from gourmet wasteland to a place that boasts Swedish restaurants and sushi bars** – “you can hear the backstory of still-pressing food supply issues from a top chef-restaurateur. American specialists such as Jose Pineda of Anthropologie Consulting are even crafting intelligent LGBT experiences, such as supper with Cuba’s first transsexual MP, and, for film buffs, meetings with curators, programmers and academics in the contemporary Cuban field.”

What managing director of GeoEx Premier Access Kate Doty refers to as the “narrow lens of American interest” is strongly focused on Havana. It is here that headline hotels and private houses are booked solid, **restaurants** are jammed with reservations, and fashionable nightspots are heavily populated with foreigners (at the hottest nightspot in Havana, the factory-set *Fábrica de Arte Cubano* – with its many bars and exhibitions, American accents ring out).

But Doty is also busy organising private-air expeditions for clients with their own planes, easier now with the recent opening of flights from American cities to 12 airports in Cuba, she says. Private-jet booking firm Victor offers direct options from some 20 US gateways too, matched with on-the-ground itineraries. The aim, it says, is to make a weekend in Havana a “no-big-deal” affair.



A suite at La Reserva, a refurbished 1914 mansion in Vedado | Image: Jean-Mathieu Ferré

The Cuban capital is the location of choice for myriad rising-quality villa and guesthouse openings. Marble staircases, high-ceilinged salons, balconies, timber-frame windows, roof terraces, tiled floors, cornicing and shuttering are all being restored, while execrable plumbing is being replaced by 21st-century bathrooms, and antiques and contemporary art are being brought in.

Belgian architect Thomas Verwacht and his Cuban wife Camila Yero have, with their business partners and a Cuba-based architectural team, created La Reserva, a 1914-built mansion in Havana's Vedado neighbourhood reborn as a new-era guesthouse. It opened in September and can be booked room by room or for exclusive use. "We chose Vedado because it is a living mix of old bourgeoisie and colourful, vibrant life," explains Verwacht, adding that "the project was two years of dust and tears". The team has ensured all materials are Cuban (except the bedlinen, mattresses and taps). They've patiently amassed furniture from early colonial times to the 1950s, as well as contemporary art by the likes of Juan Roberto Diago Durruthy, and have planted an exuberant tropical garden. Menus are based on season and market availability; guides are specialised, with excursions possible beyond the Havana city limits; and a proper, trained concierge facilitates the discovery of food, music and the arts. There's a room for business meetings, and massages and airport pick-up on demand.



The Manzana de Gómez building | image: Rex Features

Another major player is Ydalgo Martínez, now involved in his third renovation. Marina 61 – currently under construction – is his latest lofty penthouse, perched over the Malecón seafront promenade in Central Havana, which promises a rooftop garden and three contemporary suites. Down the road, Malecón 663 will offer chic rooms for rent, a café and an idiosyncratic on-site concept store from February.

Outside Havana, the force of the tourism footprint is redefining travel for those who prefer seclusion and **adventure**. It would be remiss to forgo the swathes of white sand dotted with plump palms and lapped by turquoise waters in a place with a relatively unexplored abundance of them. Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts is opening Dhawa Cayo Santa María in early 2017 on the narrow islet called Cayo Santa María, just off the north-central coast; it will be followed by Angsana Cayo Santa María, then Banyan Tree Cayo Buba and Angsana Cayo Buba, both near the popular beach resort Varadero.



Havana nightspot Fábrica de Arte Cubano | Image: Ernesto Jiménez

Until that happens, there is arguably no resort capable of delivering elegant, unruffled style. But with 5,750km of coast, a boat is the perfect way to create the deserted-beach experience, despite Cuba's as yet nascent and explorative yachting culture. Stalwart Camper & Nicholsons has one skippered motor yacht available for Cuban waters: *Jopaju*, a classic 34m Westport that sleeps eight. Paul Madden Associates, meanwhile, is the only American yacht company to hold a specific US Treasury licence to operate yachts in Cuba (its first arrived in August 2015); it brings owner yachts to the island and has other vessels available for chartering. The phone, he says, is ringing "off the hook".

Some operators can organise a private yacht trip to the Canarreos Archipelago, off Cayo Largo, where quiet days on sandbars, reefs and deserted cays are still possible. Or the ultimate treat is Jardines de la Reina, where Avalon diving centre's pared-down boats offer fly fishing and *out-of-this-world sub-aqua*. The Galápagos of the Caribbean, Jardines de la Reina is a bright spot in *the bleak story of global oceanic decline*, its islands, cays, islets and banks an accidental virgin paradise with epic, fluorescent coral. One moment eagle rays glide past, the next silver shoals of tarpon barrel straight at you and curious hammerhead, reef, silky, lemon, blacktip and nurse sharks peer into your mask, before shooting off into the great blue yonder (their presence is a sign of a healthy reef). Then there's Ponant, the world's only French-flagged line, which is launching boat trips for Americans in January, focusing, it says, on "meaningful" encounters with Cuban artists, professionals and leaders. With only 32 cabins, journeys will be both elite and hard to secure.



French cruise firm Ponant is launching Cuba trips in January | Image: François Lefebvre

Back on the mainland, one can escape the tourist trail by going east. Quiet Baracoa has wild swimming in spades, its palm-shrouded sands mostly deserted. Jumping off the waterfall, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*-style, after trekking through Alejandro de Humboldt National Park, with local kids doing backflips next to you, is an irreproducible experience, as is swimming at dusk in one of the many forgotten rivers. In Santiago de Cuba, there are villa bookings that combine sea access with culture. There's one midcentury retreat – available through Cuba Private Travel – five minutes' walk from a sea pool and a little private bay, overlooking the El Morro fortress. The firm also offers “wild beach days” on some of the less frequented beaches to the west of Havana: travellers are sent with a helper armed with a sun shelter, huge mats and an icebox filled with lunch and beverages; go midweek and you'll **have a whole bay to yourself**.

Right now, beds and infrastructure are problematic in Cuba. However, a smorgasbord of golf resorts, villa and apartment projects, luxury hotel debuts and boutique unveilings are in the pipeline, thanks to a foreign investment law passed in 2014 that enables joint hotel ventures between Cuban partners and foreign companies. Since then, 56 projects have been announced, including 33 hotel-management contracts. UK developer London + Regional Properties was one the first off the blocks with The Carbonera Club near Varadero, which is finally set to break ground in 2017 after years of negotiations, and promises over 150 rooms with Conran-designed elements, a spa, an 18-hole golf course and 1,000 residences. Close on London + Regional's heels are big-budget Canadian, Chinese, Spanish and French projects dotted across the island.

In Havana, Starwood (recently acquired by Marriott) became the first US hotel company to enter the fray for 60 years. The reopening of the iconic Hotel Inglaterra is imminent, and refurbishment is underway on the gorgeous Hotel Santa Isabel on Plaza de Armas. Meanwhile, Kempinski hopes to take over the Manzana de Gómez building, Cuba's first shopping mall, and Sofitel So La Habana is under construction on the corner of the Malecón and El Prado. The state brand Habaguanex will also open four hotels in Old Havana before 2020. So prolific is the building work it's impossible to escape the sound of pneumatic drills and clouds of brick dust in certain parts of the city.

When all this has come to pass, the city and island will be irrevocably changed. The carnival has started and Cuba's creative genie is out of the bottle, in more ways than one. Go now – just be armed with the right connections and do it the right way.