

FINANCIAL TIMES

christmas unwrapped

A woman with dark hair, wearing a dark top with a large, ruffled yellow collar and a long, floral-patterned skirt, is holding a large white swan. She is standing in a room with a window on the right and a dark wall on the left. The overall tone is historical and elegant.

how to spend it
festive edition



More photos of the design can be found on Cuba's website through page 5. However, make a note of 11 Havana's 10th Street and Havana's 10th Street.

When a commercial of your 1980s-era home in Cuba is featured on the island, it's a sure sign of success. The first 10 years have been a roller coaster. The Rolling Stones played to thousands at their debut there. Karl Lagerfeld's 17 Chanel show to the island's celebrity friends, a huddle of wide-eyed fashionistas 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 since the December 2014

agreement with the United States was announced. There is one caveat, however: the island's economy has been slow to grow, and many Cubans still experience the "real" Cuba. It is 'ruined' by commercialisation – some fear, re-Americanisation.

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, industrial 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

cuba lib



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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**



Havana has gone from gourmet wasteland to a place boasting Swedish restaurants and sushi bars

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* – pictured above far right – 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.

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, corning 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* (pictured on previous pages), 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.

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*.

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* (pictured on previous pages), a



the Manzana de Gómez building, left, which Kempinski hopes to take over. Havana nightspot Fábrica de Arte Cubano. Sharks abound on Avalon's diving trips in the Jardines de la Reina

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.

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



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French cruise firm Ponant is launching Cuba trips in January

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 (pictured on previous page), 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.

On “wild beach days” travellers are sent with a helper armed with huge mats and iceboxes of food

All experiences and accommodation can be booked through **Cuba Private Travel** (07793-451 652; www.cubapivatetravel.com). **Anthropologie Consulting**, +1786-955 6660; www.acjourneys.com. **Avalon**, www.cuban divingcenters.com. **Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts**, 00800-3002 0000; www.banyan-tree.com, prices not yet set. **Camper & Nicholsons**, 020-7009 1950; www.camperandnicholsons.com. **The Carbonera Club**, www.the carboneraclub.com, prices not yet set. **Fábrica de Arte Cubano**, Calle 26, Havana (+537-838 2260; www.fac.cu). **GeoEx Premier Access**, +1415-922 0448; www.geonex.com. **Hotel Inglaterra**, Paseo del Prado 416, Havana (www.hotelinglaterra-cuba.com), prices on request. **Hotel Santa Isabel**, Plaza de Armas, Havana (www.hotelsantaisabel.com), from £139. **La Reserva**, 508 Calle 2, Havana (+537-833 5244; www.lareservavedado.com), from \$150. **Malecón 663**, between Padre Varela and Gervasio, Havana (+535-840 5403; www.malecon663.com), from \$150. **Marina 61**, Hornos con Vapor, Marina 61, Havana (+537-830 8727; www.cubaguesthouse.com), prices not yet set. **Paul Madden Associates**, +1401-236 8686; www.private-yacht.net. **Ponant**, 0800-980 4027; www.ponant.com. **Sofitel So La Habana**, 0871-663 0625; www.sofitel.com), prices not yet set. **Victor**, 020-7384 8550; www.flyvictor.com.

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