



From the fortress of El Morro, visitors can enjoy a panoramic view of Havana.



Dancers from the Cabaret Parisién take the stage at Hotel Nacional de Cuba.

A Taste of Forbidden Fruit

Through travel windows such as “people-to-people” tours, Americans are pulling back the curtain on Castro-era Cuba.

Story and photography by Charles and Mary Love

Our taxi pulled up to a crumbling, white mansion in Centro Habana, one of 15 municipalities in the capital city of Cuba, as afternoon eased into night. Adorned with ornate moldings and weighty balustrades, the building whispered “faded glory.” This was La Guarida, Spanish for “the lair,” arguably the most famous of Havana’s new breed of small, privately owned restaurants called *paladares*.

A hefty man opened the cab door. “*Buenos noches*,” he said. Then, detecting we were English speakers, he asked, “From where do you come?”

“*Estados Unidos*,” we replied.

“Welcome! Did you know Beyoncé and Jay-Z were here not long ago?”

We knew. The music industry’s first billionaire couple had ruffled feathers in the United States with their April 2013 visit to the Communist country; several members of Congress would denounce the trip as a thinly disguised tourist jaunt, violating U.S. restrictions on tourism.

But Beyoncé and Jay-Z had come to Cuba legally, as had we, under a U.S. government-sanctioned program that allows licensed travel companies and select institutions

OUT AND ABOUT IN CUBA

DINING

Cuba's culinary roots are in Spain, France, Africa and the Caribbean. Flavors of garlic, onions, green pepper, citrus and bay leaf liven up typical dishes such as rice and beans, yucca, roast chicken or pork, and fresh seafood. Privately owned *paladares* offer some of the best dining in Cuba. Favorites include **La Guarida**, **Doña Eutemia** and **San Cristóbal** in Havana and **Sol Ananda** in Trinidad.

MUSIC/DANCE

Popular cabaret shows may be seen at **The Tropicana** and the **Cabaret Parisiën** in Havana. For local music and dancing, visit **Casa de la Música**, **El Gato Tuerto**, **El Tablao de Pancho** or **La Zorro y El Cuervo** (Latin jazz).



SHOPPING

You cannot bring back rum, cigars and antiques to the United States. Cultural items such as books, music CDs, visual art and handicrafts are allowed. Certain purchases must be documented at the point of sale, so be sure to ask before you buy. Ask your tour company about limits on what a U.S. citizen can spend.



Diners enjoy a taste of Old Havana at Doña Eutemia, a family restaurant.

(museums, universities and other nonprofits) to offer “people-to-people” trips with educational and cultural itineraries.

We stepped through a small carriageway and up two flights of curving marble stairs. The first landing opened to an empty room with marble tiles; in the middle stood a row of Corinthian columns. Up the next flight, past a headless marble goddess, we found La Guarida and its three small candlelit rooms. Large mirrors and photos of celebrity clientele competed for space on ochre-colored walls. The diners, mostly Spanish-speaking, were relaxed and talkative.

Despite elegant details (white linens, crystal chandeliers), the restaurant's furniture might have been collected on sporadic shopping sprees to an antiques mall. Each chair was different. No glass or plate matched. Yet, somehow, it managed to hang together—a metaphor for today's Cuba where industrious people are “making-do” to overcome years of economic hardship.

And what about our entrées of fresh seafood? Let's just say it was clear why many people say the best cuisine in Cuba is in her *paladares*. La Guarida's Cuban fare was decidedly more sophisticated than any we'd sampled in restaurants in South Florida. Fish was a specialty. Grouper arrived on a bed of cooked greens in a light, white-wine garlic sauce. Also on the menu: seafood boiler with Indian curry and swordfish with vanilla sauce. For dessert, we chose an airy guava mousse.

Over the next seven days, our trip adhered to U.S. government requirements that the focus be on “educational exchange activities” that result in “meaningful interactions.” Five days in Havana and two in Trinidad, a beautiful United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site, allowed us to explore both cities and

the countryside in between.

Although people-to-people trips have strict itineraries with limited flexibility, many travelers find them enjoyable and make repeat journeys. They usually include visits to historic sites, arts organizations, schools, farms and model communities. Evenings are free to dine, dance, attend a cabaret show—or simply relax on your own.

The growing interest in visiting Cuba has partly to do with its status as “forbidden fruit.” Prohibited from visiting for many years, Americans are now seizing any opportunity to see Castro-era Cuba before it becomes more commercialized. As one of our travel companions confessed, “I just wanted to see Havana before it becomes another Miami Beach!”

A BYGONE ERA

After all, a visit to Cuba is a nostalgia trip. High rises are nearly absent from skylines. McDonald's and mega-chain stores haven't invaded. Billboards are few. And 1950s-era American cars—not collectibles, but functional family vehicles and taxis—cruise the streets.

But Cuba's welcoming people are the biggest attraction. As British-born novelist and longtime Havana visitor Pico Ayer wrote, “I couldn't resist the effervescence, the beauty, the spirited sophistication of the place ... the people I met could hardly have been more sparkling.”

Accompanying our group was a knowledgeable local guide who seemed objective, not a conduit for government propaganda. She was open about government control of the media, poverty (the average wage is around \$20 per month) and the depressed Cuban economy.

She also mentioned positive, widely acknowledged facts: Cuba has the second highest literacy rate in Latin America (99 percent); education is free, even for medical students; a respected medical system sends many well-



Street vendors are a common sight in Old Havana.

trained doctors to help in other developing countries; and private enterprise is on the rise.

What's most surprising about Cuba to a first-time American visitor? We found no cult of Castro (Fidel never encouraged this). But pictures of the revolutionary Che Guevara were everywhere—on walls, billboards, posters, key chains, even sprinkled in nutmeg on our cappuccinos. Although the country is poor by international standards, there's little to no begging in the streets. The friendly atmosphere in urban areas, by day and night, made us feel as safe, or safer, than in many U.S. cities. Everything, from hotel rooms to public restrooms, was remarkably clean. The hotels, in fact, offered better amenities than we'd expected—comfortable rooms, Internet service (though very slow), large breakfast buffets and more.

In Havana, our accommodation was the government-owned Hotel Nacional de Cuba, the favorite of visiting statesmen and celebrities since the 1930s. Designed by McKim, Mead and White, a New York architectural firm, the Italian Renaissance-style hotel sits on a bluff overlooking Havana's four-mile-long promenade, the Malecón. Under its colonnaded arcades, guests puff Cuban cigars and down Mojitos while a band on the lawn plays songs from earlier times. Here, we settled into a late-afternoon routine of sipping drinks while enjoying the live music and watching international guests come and go.

SITES TO BEHOLD

The Old City of Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is built around several plazas, most bordered with colonial-era buildings, churches, former palaces and sidewalk cafés. It features one of the largest concentrations of Spanish Colonial architecture in the New World, plus styles ranging from Baroque to contemporary. After a few walks about town, we wished we had more time to explore. After all, where else can you see, in the same morning, a 16th-century Spanish fortress and an exact replica of the U.S. Capitol building (it houses Cuba's National Assembly)? Or compare the spare lines of a simple colonial-era porch with the flamboyant ornamentation of a neoclassical town home?

A highlight on Havana's waterfront is the Castillo de la Real Fuerza. Built between 1558 and 1577, it was the first Spanish fortress in the New World. It overlooks the Malecón, the waterfront promenade and social venue dubbed the "world's longest couch." Throughout the day and night, lovers



Right: A cyclist looks for a fare in Trinidad.
Inset: Fishermen and swimmers share the waters beyond the Malecón (Castillo de la Real Fuerza is in the background).

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If You Go

▪ **Tours:** It's not difficult to find a tour to Cuba. For starters, check out **Friendly Planet** (friendlyplanet.com), **Insight Cuba** (insightcuba.com), **Abercrombie & Kent** (abercrombiekent.com), **Smithsonian Journeys** (smithsonianjourneys.org) and **National Geographic Expeditions** (nationalgeographicexpeditions.com). If you have a special interest, like photography, architecture or medicine, look for specialty tours organized by associations, universities or museums.

▪ **Flights:** Your tour operator will book a charter flight for you. It takes less than an hour to fly from Miami to Havana.

▪ **Entry documents:** American visitors need a valid passport. Tour companies will provide other necessary documents and licenses.

▪ **Lodging:** Hotels in Cuba range from high-end lodging to budget rooms, but most tours book the better ones. Popular Havana hotels include **Hotel Nacional de Cuba** (hotelnacionaldecuba.com), **Hotel Saratoga** (hotel-saratoga.com), **Hotel Santa Isabel** (hotelsantaisabel.com) and **Hotel Telegrafo** (hoteltelegrafo-cuba.com).

▪ **Health:** Cuban medical insurance, included in the price of the tour, is required. The Cuban health care system is considered to be very good.

▪ **Money:** U.S. dollars, credit/debit cards and traveler's checks are not accepted in Cuba. Dollars must be converted to Cuban convertible pesos (CUC\$) and are subject to a commission of up to 13 percent. Take cash, then convert to CUC\$ as necessary. Place your cash in a concealed money belt and/or in your hotel's safe deposit box.

▪ **What to take:** Visitors may bring personal belongings, camera gear, tape recorders, sports equipment and personal computers. You are not allowed to take GPS equipment, narcotics and pornography. U.S. cell-phone service does not extend to Cuba. Bring casual clothing and comfortable walking shoes.



stroll or entwine on perches along the sea wall, revelers perform, fishermen cast lines and boys dive off large boulders into the sea.

No architectural tour would be complete, however, without a visit to Trinidad, the third oldest settlement in the country (founded in 1514) and the capital of the former sugar trade. A grand church and 18th- and 19th-century pastel-colored houses border Plaza Mayor, Trinidad's main square. Narrow cobblestone streets lead to shops, art galleries and private residences, some of them now museums. Ordinary folks occupy many of these historic buildings, which have large central courtyards and Moorish-style tiles. They sell piña coladas from their windows or invite passersby inside to dine at their *paladares*.

At night, public squares and small clubs come alive with music. Strolling through the narrow streets after dinner, we usually checked out several bands, then lingered in a club featuring the driving rhythms of Afro-Cuban music—a genre that became our favorite.

FROM SALSA TO CHE

Few if any countries the size of Cuba possess such an embarrassment of musical riches. As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Eugene Robinson has written, "Through all Cuba's bipolar, historical lurches, two things have been constant: music and dance. From decade to decade, Cuba has been a land of music, and Cubans have danced as if their lives depended on it."

The country's music results from a potpourri of influences—African, Spanish, French, Haitian and others—and has inspired many types of dance: salsa, son, rumba and mambo, to name a few. Its daily presence in people's lives is evident on street corners, in dance halls and in all-night clubs like Havana's Casa de la Musica, where visitors can salsa all night with the locals. While it's illegal to bring back alcohol and cigars, imports of cultural items are allowed. Accordingly, we couldn't resist purchasing music CDs from nearly every band we heard.



Cathedral de San Cristobal



One afternoon, our group visited Prodanza, the ballet school directed by Laura Alonzo, daughter of Cuba's most famous ballerina, Alicia Alonzo, who with her husband, Fernando, founded in 1948 the predecessor of the renowned Ballet Nacional de Cuba. Laura coached a pair of dancers through a sensuous *pas de deux* on an outdoor stage. Afterward, she came over and said with a mischievous smile, "In Cuba, flirting is the national sport!" As we left, she added with pride that her graduates have gone on to perform with top companies around the world.

Another highlight on our itinerary was a visit to the Che Guevara Memorial, completed in 1988 just outside the town of Santa Clara. The size of the complex, which includes a 22-foot bronze statue of Che, reflects the interest people around the world (millions of foreigners have visited from more than 100 countries) have in this revolutionary, who teamed with Castro to overthrow the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista, in 1959.

In addition to housing the remains of Che (he

was killed in Bolivia in 1967) and 29 of his fellow combatants, the complex displays many of his possessions, as well as the iconic image of Che taken by Cuban photographer Alberto Korda.

LESSONS LEARNED

We were told that the organic farm cooperative on our itinerary, just east of Havana, was similar to others around Cuba. Such farms were born of necessity in the 1990s by starving Cubans after the Soviets abandoned the country and stopped financing equipment and fertilizers. Today, many of these farms are models of private enterprise and sustainable agriculture.

Isis Salines Milla, daughter of the farm's founder, spoke with us. She was passionate about the benefits the farm was providing its workers: relatively high wages, daily meals, even haircuts. Just as important, she explained, it was giving them a sense of working for themselves—as well as for the broader community. We saw this as a curious convergence of free enterprise and Communist values.

A small solar oven near the fields prompted

our guide to comment that developing renewable energy is a priority in Cuba. She added that the country is currently building a large, solar energy complex to help reduce dependence on oil, imported primarily from Venezuela.

On our last evening in Havana, a small group of us went dancing at a high-energy nightclub. The band was rocking. Dancers—a mix of locals, Americans and Europeans—crowded a tiny floor as candy-colored spotlights illuminated arms and legs in perpetual motion. When the band reached a fever pitch, everyone clapped to the beat. One Cuban singer after another took the stage then strolled around the packed room crooning as if his or her life depended on it. Eugene Robinson's words resonated again, "Cubans live to dance ... and dance to live."

Upon returning, quite exhausted, to our hotel, we thought about all we'd learned. Despite poverty, lack of free speech, dependence on food and oil imports and the negative effects of an ongoing U.S. trade embargo, Cuba struggles onward in fits and starts. Historic, urban neighborhoods are gradually being restored. Cubans now start their own retail businesses. They buy and sell homes privately. Tourism, plus exports of nickel and human capital—along with financial remittances from Cubans living abroad—provide revenues that sustain the economy. Through it all, Cubans exude a resourcefulness and contagious *joie de vivre*.

Peggy Goldman, president of Friendly Planet, the company that led our tour, spoke of the value of people-to-people tours: "There's never been a time in history when we've had an opportunity to send thousands of ambassadors of our way of life to Cuba ... it's a very direct and positive connection."

It had become clear why these cultural tours are growing in popularity. Such educational travel fosters mutual understanding and goodwill. Just as important, it provides a window into a country whose complexities are endlessly fascinating. 🇨🇺



Above, from left: A performer poses in front of a mural in the Callejon de Hamel; a mural of Che Guevara; a vintage car in Trinidad. **Left:** A rooftop view of Trinidad