

CANADIAN TRAVELLER – *Delivering Destination Information*

CT

January 2011

Scottsdale
Australia
Azores
Utah

CUBAN RHYTHMS

**Step Up Sales
On Page 48**

EXTRA THIS MONTH
Incredible India
Keeper Sales Tool



A Feast For the Senses

Cuba's Feisty Capital Comes Alive After Dark

By Mark Sissons

Havana may be physically decaying from decades of isolation and neglect, but Cuba's feisty capital is anything but crumbling when it comes to nightlife, cuisine and cultural attractions.



CARIBBEAN

[cuba]

Overwhelmingly Catholic, yet wrapped in a communist straight-jacket, Havana is surprisingly liberal, laid-back and unabashedly sensual. It also has more than its fair share of internationally acclaimed cultural institutions, including the National Ballet of Cuba, House of the Américas, Foundation of New Latin American Film and National Folkloric Dance Group.

But it's this remarkably resilient Latin American city's legendary nightlife that keeps even the most energetic visitor stimulated. Toss in some of the Caribbean's finest cuisine – best sampled at unofficial restaurants operating in private homes called *paladares* – and you have an intoxicating recipe for a truly unique and unforgettable travel experience.

Prior to Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, Havana was one of the Caribbean's premiere vacation destinations for Americans, notorious as a gambling getaway for the rich and infamous. For the past half century, however, the US government's travel ban on this communist stronghold a mere 144 kilometres from Miami has meant relatively few American visitors and a near total absence of the crass consumer culture that inevitably follows them. The result is a unique and – for visitors, at least – refreshing sense of travelling back through time to a bygone era.

But experiencing the real La Habana isn't just about cruising in old American cars, cigars or cheap rum. Nor is it watching the waves breaking on the famous boulevard El Malecón, an eight-kilometre-long seafront promenade with stunning views of the Bay that is transformed in the evenings into a long open-air theatre. Or catching touristy dance variety shows at the Cabaret Tropicana. To really experience the best of Havana's culture and nightlife,

you have to go to the musical and gastronomic source.

Savour The Sounds Of A Bygone Era

To truly understand where Cuba's famous music came from, head for Havana's historic music halls and clubs. Particularly legendary is El Gato Tuerto, once a popular hangout for famous writers and singers back in the decadent '50s, and now a hotspot for bolero, featuring first-rate artists. For a real nostalgia trip, check out the Salón 1930 'Compay Segundo'. Home of the original Buena Vista Social Club, made famous in Wim Wenders' 1996 film, this glamorous ballroom is still a must see if you're into watching master musicians playing with real *panache*.

Salón 1930 is the cultural centrepiece of the landmark Hotel Nacional, the location of choice for the rich and famous since it first opened in 1930. Everyone from Winston Churchill to Al Capone has stayed here, and no doubt enjoyed a sunset rum-infused cocktail at the hotel bar La Terraza, with its spectacular views of the Malecón.

Follow The Rhythms Of The Night

It's hard to escape live music in Havana, from the buskers along the cobbled streets of La Habana Vieja (the Old Town) to the

incredibly talented musicians performing in small, neighbourhood bars and cafés. The city's nightlife scene is divided roughly between the more touristy La Habana Vieja and the many lively bars and clubs located in the more upscale districts of Vedado and Miramar.

Packed with bars, tango houses and cultural centres, Havana Vieja is a great place to hear authentic Cuban music. Many establishments occupy beautifully restored colonial-era buildings that were collectively designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 1982. For bar hopping, head for the main strip of Calle Obispo, where you're also likely to encounter groups of street musicians, or even a carnival procession, while salsa, son and hip-hop-inspired reggae blares from every doorway. Or, if you prefer to slip on your dancing shoes and join the party, head for El Café Taberna, Havana's very first café (opened 1772), and now a celebrated salsa school where you can drop in anytime for lessons.

In Vedado, don't miss El Gato Tuerto, an eccentric, intimate live music venue featuring Cuban bolero. Renovated in 2010, this one-of-a-kind nightspot features a first-rate selection of leading Cuban singers, often with several top names performing on the same night. Miramar's La Casa de la Música is another popular favourite, partly because it attracts a large number of foreign dance academy students during high season, when you'll never be short of eager dance partners.

Taste Authentic Home-Style Cuisine

Havana's best food is served at privately-run restaurants, known as *paladares*. Most are small, family-run enterprises that serve creative variations on traditional Cuban dishes like pork with Caribbean rice and beans. The more upscale among

Havana's beautifully restored colonial-era buildings were collectively designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 1982 and house cafés, bars, museums and clubs.

CARIBBEAN

[cuba]

them offer everything from eggplant caviar with red pepper coulis and variations on red snapper to freshly fried chicharrones (pork rinds), baked chicken asado, barbecued lamb and stewed rabbit. A good selection of beer and wine is also available.

Illegal until 1995, paladares offer a refreshing alternative to state-run establishments. Dining at these often fascinating establishments also offers visitors the opportunity to experience Havana neighbourhoods never seen on tours and visit private homes, some of which are grandiose and elaborately furnished remnants of the pre-communist era.

Among the most popular paladares are La Guarida, the setting for the Oscar nominated film *Strawberry and Chocolate*, and La Divina Pastora, located on the other side of Havana Bay, which offers a spectacular city view. Other favourites include La Cocina de Lilliam, set amid a romantically lit garden, and Restaurante Gringo Viejo, tarted up to resemble a speakeasy, complete with a large movie poster of Gregory Peck, who starred as the eponymous *Old Gringo*.

Enjoy Genuine Warmth & Civility

Habaneros, as the citizens of Havana are called, are famous for their hospitality, ingenuity and resilience in the face of seemingly endless hardship. Spend even a few days among them and you can't help but be impressed by their indomitable spirit and optimism. Sure, there are the legions of sly hustlers and unsavoury touts found anywhere in the world that depends on tourist income for survival. But in this economically poor, yet artistically rich time warp of a town, the earthy authenticity of its people will undoubtedly remain a source of inspiration long after the salsa bands have stopped playing, the sensual dancers have stopped mesmerizing, the paladares have shut down, and that last mojito has been drunk. ✈

For more information on Cuba, visit www.gocuba.ca

Experiencing the real La Habana isn't just about cruising in old American cars, cigars or cheap rum. You have to go to the musical and gastronomic source.



Drink

4165 El Gato Tuerto (Calle O, entre 17 y 19, 833 2224)

Compay Segundo' (Hotel Nacional de Cuba, Calle P, esquina 21, 836 3564/3567)

El Cafe Taberna - (Mercaderes, corner of Tte Rey; 00 537 861 1637)

El Gato Tuerto - Calle O, between calle 17 and calle 19, Vedado. Tel. 838 2696.

La Casa de la Música - Calle Galiano #267, between calle Neptuno and calle Concordia, Centro Habana. Tel. 862 or 860 8296.

Eat

La Guarida, 318 Concordia, between Gervasio and Escobar, (53) 62-4940

La Cocina de Lilliam, 1311 Calle 48, between 13 and 15, (53) 29-6514

Restaurante Gringo Viejo, 454e Calle 21, between E and F, (53) 32-6150

CT-Online

It's NOT News!

Searchable, Relevant, Invaluable destination information you need to help you earn more commissions!



- ✓ Over 500 destination focused articles.
- ✓ In-depth Destination Guides for Canadians
- ✓ Destination of the Week and of the Month features provide those special insights to help you sell!
- ✓ Searchable by destination or experience.
- ✓ Informative "How to Sell" tips from Steve Crowhurst.
- ✓ Exclusive interviews with, and tips from, Canada's top tour operators.
- ✓ Weekly promotions and offers from industry suppliers.
- ✓ Share to social, or post consumer articles to facebook.

Visit www.CanadianTraveller.net today and come back every Monday!
CT Online for new offers, contests, articles and more.