

welcome to Cuba



Mildewed Magnificence

There ought to be a banner in the arrivals hall at Havana airport that reads 'Abandon preconceptions, all ye who enter here.' Get ready for shocks, surprises, and eye-opening epiphanies. Twenty-first century Cuba promises to be like nowhere else you've ever visited: economically poor, but culturally rich; visibly mildewed, but architecturally magnificent; infuriating, yet at the same time, strangely uplifting. If the country were a book, it would be James Joyce's *Ulysses*; layered, hard to grasp, serially misunderstood, but – above all – a classic.

Cuba's intricacies are a result of its history, a troubled saga of external interference

and internal strife that has bred genocide, slavery, invasion, counterinvasion, and popular revolution. Floating halfway between the US to the north and Latin America to the south, the archipelago has long struggled to work out where it fits in. Even its ecology, as German scientist Alexander von Humboldt once observed, is decidedly weird, a kind of 'Caribbean Galápagos' where contradictory phenomena coexist.

A Certain Romance

For half a century Cuba has been infamous for its politics, dominated by the increasingly wrinkled visage of Fidel Castro, who only has to cough for the world media to go on red alert. But the polemics hide deeper



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Cuba is a continuing education. Just when you think you've figured it out, it confounds you with another brow-beating riddle. That essentially is its underlying attraction.

(left) Classic American car in the streets of Habana Vieja, Havana
(below) Musicians playing traditional Cuban music in a bar, Havana.



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secrets. Most visitors are surprised to arrive in Havana and find, not some grey communist dystopia, but a wildly exuberant place where the taxi drivers quote Hemingway and even hardened cynics are ensnared by the intrigue and romance.

Cuba's romance isn't of the candlelit, dinner-for-two variety. Here, in a country of few material possessions, life can be raw, in your face, and rough around the edges. But, the austerity is only half the story. Cuba is crammed with innumerable impossible-to-buy riches. Ponder the Latin Lotharios holding court on Havana's Malecón, the ingenious DIY-merchants fine-tuning their hybridized Russian-American cars, or the old ladies in rollers conjuring culinary miracles out of nothing.

The Spirit of Survival

That Cuba has survived is a miracle in itself. That it can still enthrall travelers from around the globe with its beaches, bays, mountains, rum, music, and impossibly verdant landscapes is an even greater achievement. The key lies in the Cubans themselves: survivors and improvisers, poets and dreamers, cynics and sages. Defying all logic, it is the people who have kept the country alive as the infrastructure has crumbled; and it is they also who have ensured that Cuba continues to be the fascinating, perplexing, paradoxical nation it is. Such uniqueness is a vanishing commodity in an increasingly globalized world. Grab it while it's still there.