



Understand Cuba

CUBA TODAY.....444

After years of stagnation, Cuba is showing tentative signs of change. How far it will go is anyone's guess.

HISTORY447

Cuban history is an edge-of-your-seat tale of a nation's long search for freedom.

THE CUBAN WAY OF LIFE.....460

Multicultural, gregarious and masters of survival; Cubans live their lives with an infectious *joie de vivre*.

LITERARY CUBA.....464

Cuban writers have created some of the best literature in Latin America. Read all about it here.

ARTS & ARCHITECTURE.....468

Highly eclectic, Cuban architecture has taken numerous styles and reinvented them – with fascinating results.

MUSIC & DANCE.....474

Nothing can match the richness, diversity and sheer ebullience of Cuba's music and dance.

SANTERÍA.....480

Dip into the country's deepest mysteries in the form of its syncretized religious rites.

THE CUBAN LANDSCAPE.....484

Fifty years of political isolation has preserved some of the most spectacular landscapes in the Caribbean.

WILDLIFE.....490

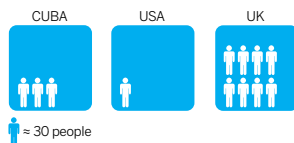
The home to snappy crocs and the world's smallest frog, Cuba has earned the moniker of the 'Galápagos of the Caribbean.'

THE FUTURE OF CUBA494

All bets are off as to what happens next in this most unpredictable of countries.



population per sq km



Cuba Today

For almost a decade now, foreign news stories about Cuba have been replaying the same cliffhanger: Fidel Castro falls ill, thousands of exiles go wild in Miami, and a generation of patient Americans dig out their *guayaberas* (Cuban shirts) and get ready to reacquire themselves with mambo dancing, *Guantanameras* and *real* cigars. Unless you've been on the moon since 2001, you'll know that this speculative scenario has yet to transpire. Life in Cuba remains suspended in 'pause' mode, the economy – buoyed by record tourist numbers in 2010 – has staggered on for another year and, most surprising of all, the octogenarian Fidel carries on defying his doctors like he once defied Kennedy and Khrushchev.

But not even Fidel can roll back the ageing process. In February 2008, after suffering for 18 months with diverticulitis disease, the old warhorse handed the leadership reins over to his younger brother, Raúl. A charisma-free zone in the eyes of many Cubans, Raúl chanced his arm with some mediocre early reforms, allowing Cubans access to tourist hotels (they had previously been barred from all but the cheapest), permitting ownership of cell phones and opening up larger tracts of land to private farmers. It wasn't radical, but it was a start.

Guarded Optimism

The Cubans greeted the inauguration of Barack Obama in January 2009 with guarded optimism. Cautiously they envisaged, if not an immediate end to the embargo, then at least the start of some long-overdue dialogue. The caution was justified. Though Obama rolled back some of the Bush administration's more controversial laws, allowing Cuban-Americans to visit their families and send financial remittances without hindrance, the anachronistic trade and travel embargo remains in place.

History Books

Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom (Hugh Thomas; 1971) Ten years in the making, this is the definitive take on Cuban history from a British academic.

Cuba: A New History (Richard Gott; 2004) Gott offers new insights into old topics.

My Life by Fidel Castro (with Ignacio Ramonet; 2006) History straight from the horse's mouth.

Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life (John Lee Anderson) Anderson's meticulous research led to the unearthing of Che's remains and their return to Cuba.

Greeting People

» *Que bolá? Que tal? Dime? Como estas? and Como van las cosas?* all mean: how are you?

» Address people as *Señor/a* (formal), *compañero/a, socio/a, amigo/a, asere* (informal), *compay* (in the Oriente only), or *hermano/a* (very friendly)