

# Welcome to Cuba

*Trapped in a time-warp, Cuba is like a prince in a poor man's coat. Behind the sometimes shabby facades, gold dust lingers.*

## Mildewed Magnificence

There ought to be a banner in the arrivals hall at Havana airport that reads 'Abandon preconceptions, all ye who enter here.' Prepare yourself to be shocked, perplexed, confounded and amazed. Cuba is a country with no historical precedents: 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.

## Historical Heritage

Halfway between the US to the north and Latin America to the south, Cuba has long struggled to work out where it fits in. Yet, as a former Spanish colony liberally colored with French, African, American, Jamaican, and indigenous Taíno influences, there's no denying the breadth of its historical heritage. When Castro pressed the pause button on economic development in the 1960s, he inadvertently saved many endangered traditions. Though the infrastructure has suffered, important historical heirlooms – forts, palaces, hotels and colonial towns – have survived. Better still, many of them are now being faithfully restored.

## Innate Musicality

Most visitors are surprised to arrive in Havana and find, not some grey communist dystopia, but a wildly exuberant place where music emanates from every doorway and even hardened cynics are ensnared by the intrigue and romance. Rhythms and melodies are ubiquitous in this melting pot of African, European and Caribbean cultures. Witness them at the opera and at the ballet; in the corner bar or through the hypnotic drumming of a Santería ceremony; with the trombonist practicing his arpeggios on the seawall, or in the rhythmic gait of the people as they saunter along Havana's musical streets.

## Meet the People

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. It is the people who have kept the country alive as the infrastructure has crumbled; and it is also they who have ensured that Cuba continues to be the fascinating, perplexing, paradoxical nation it is.



## Why I Love Cuba

By Brendan Sainsbury, Author

When I think of Cuba, I always think of my first night back in Havana after a break; the busy atmospheric streets, the snapshots of lives lived out in the open, and the unmistakable aromas: tropical papaya mixed with tobacco leaf, petrol and musty carpets. I love Cuba because it's a forbidden fruit, a complex country of head-scratching contradictions which, however many times you visit, will never adequately answer all your questions. Most of all I love its musicality, its robust culture, its wonderfully preserved history, and the fact that it can frustrate you one minute and unexpectedly inspire you the next.

**For more about our authors, see p544.**

Above: Avenida Simón Bolívar, Havana (p58)