

Welcome to Cuba

Timeworn but magnificent, dilapidated but dignified, fun yet maddeningly frustrating – Cuba is a country of indefinable magic.

Expect the Unexpected

Cuba is like a prince in a poor man's coat: behind the sometimes shabby facades, gold dust lingers. It's these rich dichotomies that make travel here the exciting, exhilarating roller-coaster ride it is. Trapped in a time warp and reeling from an economic embargo that has grated for more than half a century, this is a country where you can wave goodbye to Western certainties and expect the unexpected. If Cuba were a book, it would be James Joyce's *Ulysses*: layered, hard to grasp, serially misunderstood, but – above all – a classic.

Historical Heritage

Meticulously preserved, Cuba's colonial cities haven't changed much since musket-toting pirates stalked the Caribbean. The atmosphere and architecture is particularly stirring in the Unesco-listed cities – Havana, Trinidad, Cienfuegos and Camagüey – where grandiose squares and cobbled streets tell erstwhile tales of opulence and intrigue. Elsewhere many buildings lie ruined and tattered like aging dowagers waiting for a face lift. With more funds, these heirlooms may yet emulate the colonial treasures in Havana and Trinidad, further proof that the safeguarding of Cuba's historical legacy has been one of the revolution's greatest achievements.

Cultural Eclecticism

Cuba hemorrhages music, a dynamic mix of styles described by aficionados as a love affair between the African drum and the Spanish guitar. Allowed to marinate for over 500 years, these diverse sounds have given birth to an intricate culture, coloring it with echoes of Africa, flickers of colonial Spain, ghosts of Taíno tribes, and cultural idiosyncrasies imported from Haiti, Jamaica, France and even China. The beauty lies in its layers and nuances. It's an eclecticism that's mirrored in its dance, architecture, language, religion, and – most emphatically – its rainbow of people.

Beyond the Beaches

Although the attractive arcs of white sand that pepper its north coast are sublime, explore beyond Cuba's beaches and you're in a different domain, a land of fecund forests and crocodile-infested swamps, suburbia-free countryside and rugged mountains as famous for their revolutionary folklore as for their endemic species. Cuba, once observed German scientist Alexander von Humboldt, is a kind of Caribbean Galapagos where contradictory curiosities coexist.



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. I recall 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. Cuba is 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 Cuba's musicality, robust culture, wonderfully preserved history, and the fact that it can frustrate you one minute and unexpectedly inspire you the next.

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Above: An iconic vintage car operates as a taxi in Havana