

Understand Cuba

CUBA TODAY448

After years of isolation, Cuba is opening up. How far it will go is anyone's guess.

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

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The Cuban culinary revolution is in full swing.

THE CUBAN WAY OF LIFE467

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

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Cuban artists have created some of the best literature, art and cinema in Latin America.

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With its eclectic array of buildings, Cuba's architecture is unashamedly unique.

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

LANDSCAPE & WILDLIFE492

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

Cuba Today

Since 2011, the Cuban government has gradually relaxed its tightly clenched fist, dispensing piecemeal reforms that have allowed long-suffering citizens to experiment with business start-ups, travel abroad, and buy and sell houses for the first time in 50 years. It's not democratic socialism quite yet, but word on the street is that Raúl Castro has done more to improve the economy in the last five years than his brother Fidel did in the previous 50.

Best on Film

Che: The Argentine (Steven Soderbergh; 2008) First part of the classic biopic focuses on Che's Cuban years.

Before Night Falls (Julian Schnabel; 2000) The life and struggles of Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas.

Fresa y Chocolate (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea; 1993) Marries the improbable themes of homosexuality and communism.

El Ojo del Canario (Fernando Pérez; 2010) Pérez' atmospheric biopic of José Martí picked up numerous Latin film awards.

Best in Print

Our Man in Havana (Graham Greene; 1958) Greene pokes fun at both the British Secret Service and Batista's corrupt regime.

Cuba and the Night (Pico Iyer; 1995) Perhaps the most evocative book about Cuba ever written by a foreigner.

Dirty Havana Trilogy (Pedro Juan Gutiérrez; 2002) Dirty, itchy study of life and sex in Havana during the Special Period.

Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life (Jon Lee Anderson; 1997) Anderson's meticulous research led to the unearthing of Che's remains in Bolivia.

New Chapter in US–Cuba Relations

By far the biggest eyebrow-raiser in the last couple of years has been Cuba's tentative rapprochement with the United States, a process that gained traction in December 2014 when the two countries brokered a prisoner swap involving US international development contractor, Alan Gross. On December 17, 2014, Barack Obama appeared on television to announce the most significant thaw in US–Cuba relations in 54 years, measures that included US telecommunications aid to Cuba, the authorization of American credit and debit cards, a gentle easing of US travel restrictions, and – most important of all – the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries for the first time since 1961.

Whether this defrosting will confine the embargo to the history books is hard to predict. In making his announcement, President Obama unequivocally opened up a new chapter in US–Cuba relations and made it clear that he wants to try to end the embargo before his presidency expires in 2017. For this, he requires Congressional approval. Despite strong pockets of resistance in the Senate and House of Representatives, polls suggest that a majority of Americans and an increasing number of Cuban-Americans want the embargo to end. However, with a solid block of long-established Cuban exiles still determined not to negotiate with the Castros, it could be a tough political fight.

New Class of Entrepreneurs

The 2011–15 reforms have helped unleash the creativity and entrepreneurship of a generation of economically stifled Cubans. Private business has rocketed in numerous trades, especially for people with ready access to hard currency. With fewer bureaucratic regulations, some *casas particulares* (Cuban homestays) have morphed into mini-hotels employing dozens of staff, and