

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 everyday assumptions and expect the unexpected. If Cuba were a book, it would be James Joyce's *Ulysses*: layered, hard to grasp, frequently misunderstood, but – above all – a classic.

Cultural Heritage

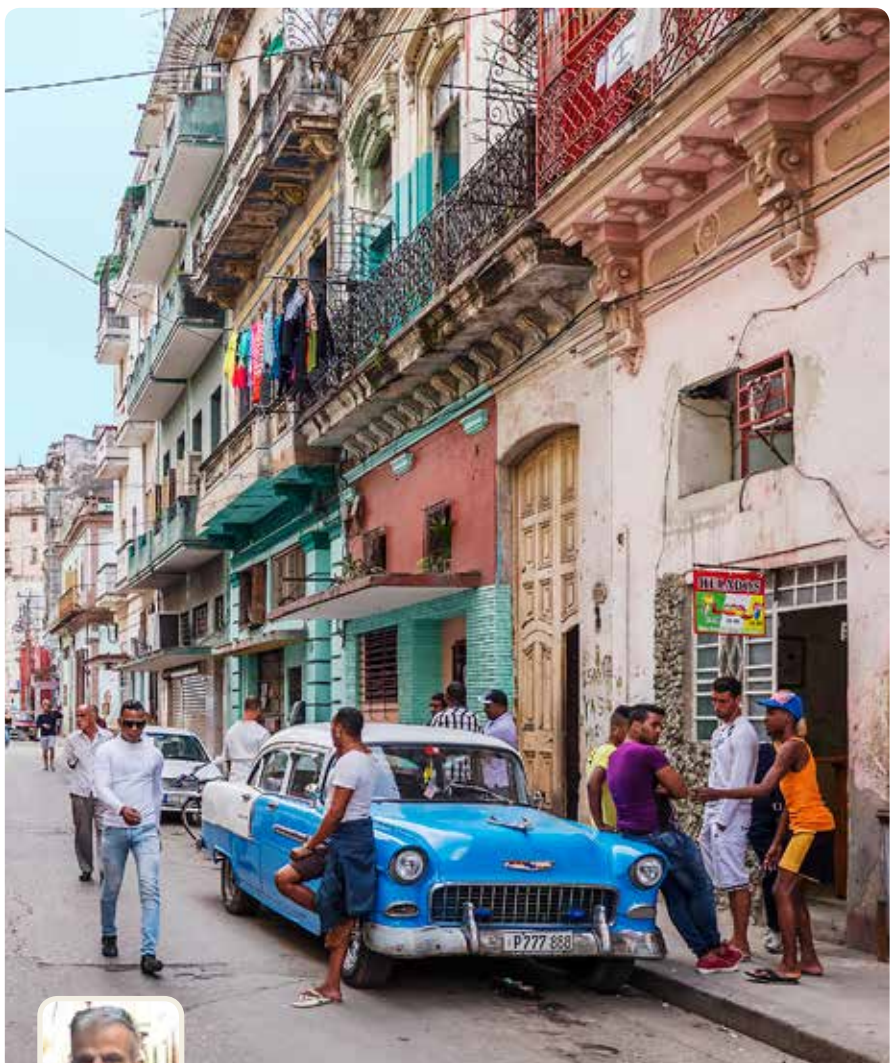
Bereft of modern interference, Cuba's colonial cities haven't changed much since musket-toting pirates stalked the Caribbean. The atmosphere and architecture is particularly stirring in Havana, Trinidad, Remedios and Camagüey where grandiose squares and cobbled streets tell of opulence and intrigue. Yet, despite pockets of preservation, many buildings still lie ruined like aging dowagers waiting for a face-lift. With more funds, these heirlooms may yet rise again. Indeed, thanks to private investment, many of them have already been partially renovated, morphing into spectacular private homestays or retro-themed restaurants proudly showing off their weighty cultural heritage.

The Perfect Time to Visit

There's rarely been a better time to visit Cuba. Private enterprise is displaying the first buds of a creative spring, while the big-name brands from that well-known frenemy in the north have yet to dilute the cultural magic. As a result, the country is rife with experimentation. Here a free-spirited cafe where earnest students sit around debating Che Guevara's contribution to world revolution; there an avant-garde art studio where the furniture is as outlandish as the exhibits. From rural Viñales to urban Havana, it's as if the whole country is slowly awakening from a deep slumber. Come now and ride the wave.

Beyond the Beaches

The vast majority of Cuba's tourists gravitate to the attractive arcs of white sand that pepper the country's north coast and offshore islands. But, explore beyond the beaches and you're in a different domain, a land of fecund forests and crocodile-infested swamps, abandoned coffee plantations and rugged mountains as famous for their revolutionary folklore as their endemic species. Cuba, once observed German scientist Alexander von Humboldt, is a kind of Caribbean Galápagos where contradictory curiosities exist side by side. Get off the beaten path and seek them out.



Why I Love Cuba

By Brendan Sainsbury, Writer

For me, Cuba has always had the allure of a forbidden fruit. I love it for its uniqueness, creativity and survivalist spirit; but, above all, I love it because, despite 60 years of setbacks, it remains an upbeat and open place. Walk down the street with a Cuban friend and, within one block, you'll have received five handshakes, four kisses, three greetings of '*dime hermano!*' and at least two invites into someone's house for a *cafecito* (or something stronger). I've been lucky enough to visit 75 countries worldwide, but Cuba will always be my *número uno*.

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