

The Sydney Morning Herald

TRAVELLER.COM.AU

TRAVELLER

SATURDAY, JANUARY 14, 2023

GET ONBOARD

Cuba's back but you'd better get there soon



IT'S TERMINAL | How to survive airport hell
PEAK TEMPS | Cool down at the best summer mountain escapes

COVER STORY

A Cuban frame of mind



Even though I'm here an hour on the traditionally sober side of midday, there's already a throng of American tourists at Ernest Hemingway's favourite bar in Old Havana, La Bodeguita del Medio.

They're here for the bar's mojito cocktails (Cuban rum, mint, sugar, lime and club soda) because La Bodeguita del Medio is where the drink was allegedly invented, and because this is where Hemingway allegedly came to drink them.

One American tour group is seated at the bar while another group drinks their mojitos outside. A third gathering waits impatiently on the sidelines. Buskers play Buena Vista Social Club tunes with their hats out for US dollars and someone is selling the Che Guevara souvenir T-shirts you knew you'd find in Cuba.

What's unusual about this very typical American tourist scene in Cuba is that it's absolutely atypical at the moment.

This is the first crowd of American tourists – or any international tourists at all – I've seen in Cuba since I got here a week ago and it's a sign of things to come. The Americans are coming (back).

Pre-COVID (and pre-Trump) cruise ships full of Americans filled its harbour, and tourist coaches dwarfed Old Havana's narrow streets. Now, the moment I leave La Bodeguita del Medio behind, I'm almost the only foreign tourist in town.

In 2008, US President-elect Barack Obama promised to create a new beginning with Cuba. In the final two years of his presidency, the country became a top attraction for US tourists, and travellers from across the world.

Cruise ships filled Havana's harbours, hundreds of commercial planes arrived at its international airports; by 2015, the number of US tourists jumped 77 per cent against 2014's tally; a year later that number increased another 74 per cent.



It's the street life, the music and the frozen-in-time cars but most of all, this incredible country is all about its people, writes Craig Tansley.

In March 2016, President Obama became the first sitting president to visit Havana since 1928, as 500,000 Cubans watched the Rolling Stones play a free concert to mark the occasion.

And then everything changed. President Trump derided Obama's changes as "a shameful accommodation to the demands of its (Cuba's) tyrants".

He and his administration drafted sanctions to tighten rules on travel, which along with the crippling effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced tourism numbers by as much as 90 per cent. Cuba suffered its most acute exodus of citizens since the Cold War, most of them leaving illegally, into the US.

But times are changing. The Biden administration is easing restrictions on travel, with more commercial flights available each month while strict COVID-19 restrictions have been dumped.

This, then, explains those surprising advance parties of American tourists back at La Bodeguita del Medio.

As Cuba re-emerges as a destination, and with the Americans set to return in conspicuous numbers, now really is the time to experience Cuba for yourself, providing a rare opportunity for proper immersion into Cuban communities.

Certainly, there were few (if any) foreigners where I was travelling, as I embarked on a new six-day tour of Cuba which uses only local guides and drivers,

with accommodation at home-stays (casas) run by local families, far from hotels or resorts. But let's start back at the beginning of my Cuban odyssey.

DAYS ONE AND TWO Old Havana

The only queues I see on arrival in Old Havana aren't outside the city's 17th-century baroque and neoclassical churches, they're up and down the footpath outside the Spanish Embassy.

Hundreds of Cubans with Spanish ancestry are dressed to the nines, pleading for a visa to get out of the city.

Life may be tough here, but visitors sure wouldn't know it. Old Havana looks as surreal as a film set. In reality, it's a UNESCO World Heritage site encircled by 500-year-old forts and the Atlantic Ocean.

Its buildings are of the primary and secondary colour variety – vibrant splashes of oranges, blues, pinks, yellows and greens – while the emblematic cars on its cobblestoned streets mostly come out of 1950s America: shiny steel Pontiacs, Chevrolets, Buicks and Studebakers which pre-date Cuba's 1959 Marxist revolution.

"They say we have the best mechanics on earth," says Yoanis Blanco Santos, co-founder and lead guide of the Australian-originated Simply Cuba Tours. "Imagine if your country had no new cars for 60 years."

What I notice most is that locals live their lives close to the street, inside regal but

crumbling apartment buildings. I'm a voyeur in Havana, merely by walking its streets.

My casa is in the heart of the Old Town, within a centuries-old apartment block. I climb a staircase to a rooftop which looks out across the city, to a lightning storm brewing above the Strait of Florida.

Old Havana is a walking city, its tight, cobble streets make driving difficult with life playing out like some sort of theatre you can only properly experience from the closest of quarters.

There's even a five-piece band playing on my street corner. I watch them, then throw two US dollars into the hat they leave out for tips. "You gave them what a doctor earns in two weeks," Santos says.

Although, post the worst of the pandemic and post-Trump, there are few tourists on the streets, there's a party atmosphere about Old Havana. Locals drink and dine at al fresco restaurants, music blares from every apartment and every tree is lit.

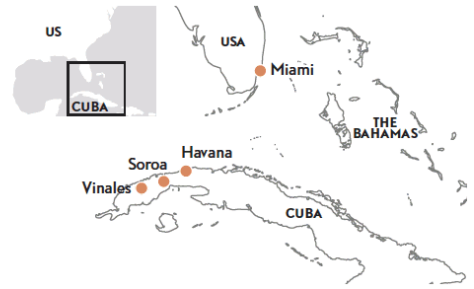
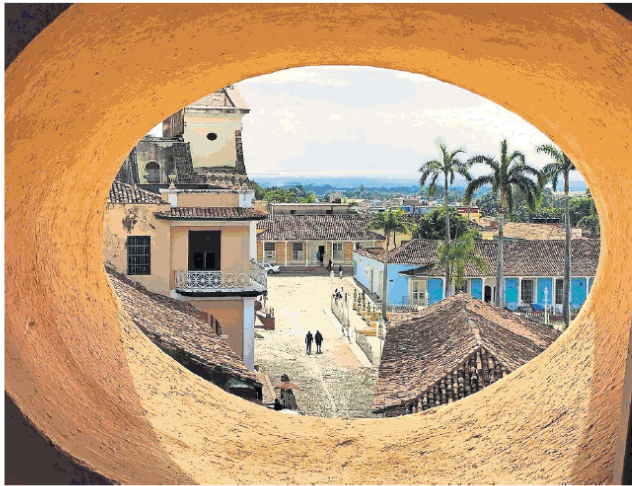
It's as if the residents of Havana celebrate electricity because they know they're the only place in Cuba assured of having it.

Santos walks me through 500-year-old plazas, fortresses and palaces (there are more than 1000 buildings of historical importance here) to a harbour where locals fish beneath palm trees which swish with the sea breeze.

"There used to be at least two cruise ships a day," Santos points at an empty space in the harbour. "Everything was busy here, cars to pick up tourists, buses, all the hawkers, you should've seen it."

Dinner tonight is in a tight laneway of al fresco restaurants and the food's delicious. I order ropa vieja, shredded beef slow cooked in tomatoes, onions, peppers, garlic and wine served with sweet plantain – Cuban food isn't simply rice and beans, it's a mix of traditional Taino food, with

Clockwise from main: The skyline and colour of downtown Havana, Cuba; a view framed of old Cuba; waterfront dining; a tobacco farmer with a cigar at the source; and vintage cars in Havana. Photos: Getty Images, iStock, Simply Cuba Tours



Caribbean, African and Spanish influences.

But it's the flavours of the street life that keep engaging me, since locals in Old Havana don't watch TV or go to bed early with a book.

The town buzzes with a blur of frenzied movement. Later as I try to sleep, the synthesis of Cuban music keeps me up until the early hours (and I don't mind at all).

DAYS TWO AND THREE

Havana to Vinales

Breakfast is served on my rooftop by the family who own my casa and who all somehow manage to play a role in the preparation of my meal. I sit at a table looking out to Havana below. (Good luck finding a latte in Cuba but the brewed coffee is strong and not so bitter).

I follow Santos around the old town for the morning, then our driver, Julio, picks us up and we hit the highway west. It takes barely 10 minutes to leave all the traffic behind. Santos is hungry and suggests we sample a traditional pork sandwich cooked by the side of the road.

Music blares from under a hot tin shed, as local workers line up beside me waiting for pork cooked over coals. Returning to his medico analogy, Santos says: "These guys can make more money in a day than a doctor in a year with the average salary in Cuba being about \$US\$5 (\$50) a month."

Our road trip becomes more like a mobile picnic as we stop and eat from vendors along the roadway – local treats mostly, like plantain balls and yuca chips.

The only cars I can see bellow black smoke but as we drive further into the countryside they are replaced by horse-drawn carts and old tractors.

Green mountains appear, beyond vast tracts of farmland. This must be what relatively nearby Florida looked like before Disney World and all those high-rises

emerged (the state is barely 160 kilometres north).

Two hours west of Havana, we enter the Vinales Valley, arguably the best – if that's an appropriate word – tobacco-growing region on Earth.

A World Heritage site, the valley's made up of karsts encircled by mountains and dome-like limestone outcrops that rise as high as 300 metres, called mogotes. The main street is a colourful collection of colonial-era timber houses.

"This is the real Cuba," Santos says. Once western Cuba's most popular tourist destination, today I'm one of only a handful of travellers here.

Where backpackers once congregated to drink cheap beer in an old square, now, more authentically perhaps, there are old men who play dominoes under palm trees, beside an old Catholic church.

I'm taken on foot down a series of muddy tracks to a tobacco farm run by an 81-year-old tobacco farmer (guajiro) who uses an ox and plough to work his crop.

His wife brews up a pot of strong coffee in a farmhouse built from corrugated iron, and we sit and sip as we smoke cigars till my head feels dizzy.

On the way back to my casa behind town, we slip into a concrete dug-out crowded with local men behind a baseball field to watch Vinales play its neighbour.

At the bottom of the ninth innings, in what is the national sport along with football, Vinales' baker, Jorge, hits a home run to steal victory for the home team, 5-4, and I'm caught in the celebrations. "There are no museums on this tour," Santos says as we walk home after, still buzzing.

I'd sooner watch the storms play themselves out over the mountains from my sillan (rocking chair) on the porch outside my casa, but I have salsa to learn. Santos returns to the casa to inform me my

teacher, unexpectedly, has left Cuba in an attempt to enter the US.

"We always have to have a contingency plan in Cuba," he says. "We have a saying, everything can be solved ... except death."

We eat dinner at a restaurant, Casa de Confianza, built on the side of a mountain within an organic farm where pigs, goats and horses roam. We dine al fresco on a wrap-around porch beside a terraced garden looking out across 500-metre-high mountains as the sun sets.

A blackout changes my plans to drink at a bar on the way home. I like the darkness anyway, outside on my porch on my sillan watching the Milky Way with my casa host, Ernesto, who speaks just enough English for me to understand how hard life has been for casa hosts without any tourists. We mostly sit in silence in the dark and watch stars shoot across the night sky.

DAYS FOUR AND FIVE

Vinales to Soroa

Yesterday was spent exploring caves, climbing mountains, hiking forests and talking to locals in sleepy paladars (family-run restaurants). Simply Cuba Tours run tours for a minimum of two guests, so it feels like I'm travelling as part of some sort of odd family unit (my driver knows not a word of English), not a tourist group.

It therefore doesn't seem unusual when Santos takes me to meet his mother on the way today to Soroa, 100 kilometres east, who tells me about the days it was forbidden to play the Beatles in Cuba.

Soroa is nestled in mountains near Cuba's north coast, part of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve locals dub the "rainbow of Cuba". I share a casa terraced up a hill in a forest with chickens, pigs, goats and a local family, who cook me copious amounts of my former co-tenants.

I'm here on a Sunday so I share this ▶

FIVE MORE THINGS TO TAKE ON BOARD

CURRENCY CHECK

Cash is king so only take US dollars or euros. Many bank cards, including Westpac, Bank Of Melbourne, Citibank, and any American credit cards notoriously won't work in Cuba.

GO BYO

Pack shampoo, soap, basic medicines as they aren't freely available. Bring extras, like pens, medicine and clothes to leave with hosts.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

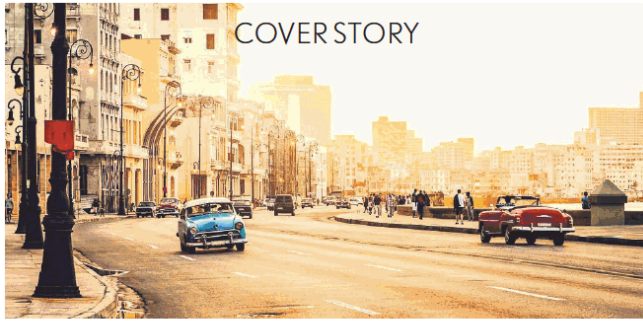
Cuba didn't get the internet until 1996. Some accommodation offers Wi-Fi but it's often unreliable and you can't roam. You can pre-order a SIM card and pick it up at Jose Marti Airport. You'll also get a data pack.

STAYING SAFE

Exercise usual precautions but travelling is generally safe. Cubans face heavy penalties for infringements against travellers; violence is punishable with long jail terms.

BE AWARE

Since ex-President Trump declared Cuba a supporter of terrorism, anyone who travels here is no longer eligible to travel to the US under the convenient ESTA visa waiver scheme. You can still apply on a non-immigrant tourist visa (B2) through the US Consulate's website (you will need to attend the consulate in Sydney or Melbourne).



COVER STORY

green oasis with families out for a day trip from Havana who ride past in trays pulled by tractors, and in prehistoric buses that labour up impossibly steep hills.

The whole valley smells of jasmine as I hike my way through forests of orchids, bromeliads and butterflies to waterfalls where local families cool down in swimming holes below the cascades.

In the evening, I sit out on my patio with a Cuban Cristal-brand beer, searching for animal shapes in the pink clouds, discussing Cuban politics with my host who likes listening to Bryan Adams sing in Spanish.

Mostly in Soroa I just like to observe Cuban life; the tiny children in school uniforms waiting at bus stops along the roadway, farmers tending fields with ploughs pulled by bullocks, workers hitch-hiking to factories and offices. That there are no other foreigners here makes me all the more interesting to them.

DAY SIX
Soróa to Havana

Before I know it, I'm back to the bright lights of Havana where my itinerary permits me one cliché, though glorious, tourist activity (not counting the Hemingway bar): a ride through Old Havana in a gleaming, pink steel 1949 Bel Air Style Line Deluxe convertible.

For 50 years Cuba imported the best cars America could produce. After its 1959 revolution, President Castro banned their importation, so Old Havana has been a living museum for classic American cars ever since (there are about 60,000 classic American cars in Cuba, half of which were made in the 1950s).

The late afternoon sun shines brightly on my face and Cuban music blares through the stereo as we cruise Old Havana's narrow streets, past murals of Guevara and statues of Castro to a four-lane esplanade beside the Atlantic.

Florida lies barely 170 kilometres north across that water (on my flight out tomorrow, I'll be alarmed to see the US below me barely 15 minutes after take-off) but Cuba, for now at least, feels about as foreign a place as could possibly be.

Craig Tansley travelled courtesy of Simply Cuba Tours.

THE DETAILS

TOUR
Simply Cuba Tours offer a six-day, five-night Wonders Of Western Cuba tour from €1875 (\$2918) a person for group sizes between two and eight. The price includes a local guide, driver, accommodation at casas and most meals and activities. Other tours are also available. See simplycubatours.com

ENTER
You need to obtain a Cuban Tourist Card before travel. If travelling through Canada it may be included in your ticket price, if travelling through Mexico or Panama, it can be obtained at the airport before travel. Or arrange via the Cuban Embassy in Australia or through a travel agent, or order online. See easytourist.com

FLY
The quickest route to Cuba goes through Los Angeles and Miami, American Airlines (aa.com) fly multiple times daily from Miami. Delta (delta.com) will fly Miami to Havana twice daily from April 10. (You'll need a tourist visa for the US, as an ESTA won't be valid – see previous page for more). Or fly LA then Mexico or Panama City with American Airlines. You'll also be able to fly via Santiago later in 2023. Consider adding Cuba to a European holiday and fly via Frankfurt or Paris, or via Qatar or Abu Dhabi.

STAY
Every hotel in Cuba is at least 51 per cent Government-owned (so if travelling from the US, you won't be able to stay at one). Some of the finest five-star hotels in Havana include Gran Hotel Manzana (kempinski.com) and Hotel Residencia Santa Clara (residenciahotels.com). However, the best options for most foreign visitors are family-run casas.

MORE
traveller.com.au/cuba
cubatravel.com

Bring back the travel magic



LEE TULLOCH

In 2023 I want to rediscover the magic of travel. I want it to be joyous again. It has been a bit of a hard slog lately. Despite people bursting out of the gates with enthusiasm last year, it's fair to say

it wasn't all smooth sailing. The lingering complications of COVID-19 created unexpected hurdles, even when most regulations were dropped. Worldwide, staff shortages in transport and accommodation were due to a combination of rampant Omicron and companies having difficulty rehiring and training staff they'd laid off during the pandemic.

Climate change is now starting to have a real impact on travel plans, due to increased storms, floods, bushfires and other natural disasters. In turn, we're beginning to assess what impact our travel plans have on climate. Unfettered jaunts around the world seem to be a thing of the past.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous quote, "It's not the destination, it's the journey", has a different meaning when the journey is complicated, fraught with mishaps and excruciatingly drawn out.

It is about the destination when you've taken a day longer than you've expected to get there, your luggage has been lost on the way, and you've been standing in line longer than you've been sitting on the plane.

If the plane ever leaves, that is. Quite a few people had their travel dreams thwarted by cancellations, delays and the glacial refunding of fares.

A few months ago, I went on a trip that was typical of 2022. The flight to Bangkok left an hour late due to missing passengers, whose luggage had to be found and removed from the flight. That meant we arrived only minutes before my connecting flight to Cambodia was due to leave. A mad rush through kilometres of Bangkok airport, trying to catch up with a speedy airport security guy (and perhaps Olympic sprinter) leading the way had me on the plane as the propellers were turning. Phew.

There was a woman in my assigned seat, who asked if she could stay there, so I took her place up the back. The unmasked guy next to me sniffled like crazy throughout the flight. I hoped he had a coke habit. Not so lucky this time.

Yes, dear reader, you guessed it. I got COVID-19.

That meant isolating in my room on the cruise for six days until I wasn't infectious and then transferring directly to my flight home from Ho Chi Minh City.

But even that didn't go smoothly. The flight hit storms flying into Singapore, we were diverted to Kuala Lumpur, I missed my connection on Qantas, was rebooked on a Singapore Airlines flight departing several hours later at 1am, which then got delayed due to late arriving passengers caught up in the storm.

I know it's bad form to grumble. It's a privilege to travel. I got home safely. The four airlines involved were all very helpful. Changi airport is not a bad place to be stuck, even after midnight. It could have been worse.

But the combination of no sleep, nerve-wracking turbulence, illness, long security and immigration lines and the stress of missed connections, had me seriously considering throwing in the travel towel.

Travel wasn't fun anymore, I decided. I longed for the era when you didn't have to worry about what viruses the

The unmasked guy next to me sniffled like crazy ... I hoped he had a coke habit.

person seated next to you on transport was carrying. When having a flight cancelled meant automatic assistance, refunds and compensation. When waiting 10 minutes on the phone to a call centre was considered a long time. When you didn't have to factor the possibility of illness into every trip.

And then I wondered – was travel ever as rosy as I was imagining? My first overseas trips were at the time of terrorism in Europe, when you sometimes were escorted by armed guards onto the plane. When being stuck in an airport like Noumea meant sitting for half a day in a hot tin shed. When air travel was less safe – DC10s were falling out of the sky. When there was little entertainment on planes to while away a 22-hour trip.

I realised the pleasure of travel is not really dimmed by any of these factors, even if they're temporarily irritating. We're booking flights and cruises in bigger numbers than ever. Given the state of the world that's a clue to how much value we place on it.

The joy of travel hasn't really gone away. It's where it always has been – within. lee.tulloch@traveller.com.au
Instagram: @bymrsamos



EXPERIENCE THE DREAM

CREATE TREASURED MEMORIES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA WITH HOSTED RAIL ADVENTURES & SMALL GROUP TOURS

James Price Point, Broome | Walmadany

WESTERN AUSTRALIA
WALKING ON A DREAM

holidaysofaustralia.com.au
holidays@holidaysofaustralia.com.au

Indian Pacific with Margaret River Highlights
8 days / 7 nights departing 12 Jul & 2 Aug 2023*
• Tour host.
• 3 nights aboard the Indian Pacific travelling from Sydney to Perth in Gold Service including all meals, drinks & Off Train Experiences in Broken Hill, Adelaide, Cook, Rawlinna & Kalgoorlie.
• 2 night stay in Perth including breakfast.
• Half day Perth & Fremantle City Explorer tour.
• 2 day Margaret River Wine Experience.
• 1 night stay in Perth including breakfast.



Fr \$4,429 pp

Deluxe Kimberley Adventure Hosted Small Group Tour
15 days / 14 nights departing 23 Jul 2023
• Tour host.
• 14 nights accommodation staying in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, the Bungle Bungle Range, Emma Gorge, Kununurra, Halls Creek & Derby.
• Scenic air adventure through the Bungle Bungle Range.
• Half day Horizontal Falls Adventure.
• 14 breakfasts, 8 lunches & 8 dinners.
• Transfers.



Fr \$13,699 pp

1300 854 897
or contact your local licensed travel agent



Terms & Conditions: Prices are per person twin share. Inclusive of all discounts, taxes, fees & port expenses if applicable which are subject to change. *2 August 2023 departure is from \$4689 pp twin share. Prices correct as at 23.12.2022. Subject to availability. Airfares, hotels & transfers are additional unless otherwise stated. Cancellation fees apply. IMPORTANT NOTE: While every effort will be made to adhere to the schedules outlined in the itinerary, please note all stops & sights outlined are subject to change, substitution or alteration for reasons of passenger safety & reasons beyond our control. For full terms & conditions contact holidays of Australia & The World. ESCO: Broome & Bungle Bungle Range images credit Tourism WA. -H46602