



QUINTESSENTIAL HAVANA

A guide to the unmissable attractions of Cuba's capital



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Grand and gritty, Havana is no ordinary city, but rather a unique combination of a 500-year tense history, marked by colonialism, mobster rule, and revolution. An architectural masterpiece where meticulously preserved squares and grandiose palaces sit amidst a colourful labyrinth of narrow streets and living, breathing urban communities, Cuba's capital stands out not only within Latin America but across the whole world. Monuments erected to celebrate Soviet leaders, galleries dedicated to Cuba's avant-garde, vintage convertibles, and a nightlife centred on pulsating live music and one too many mojitos make this growingly accessible city a must-visit. What's more, its cultural and physical landscape in constant flux, meaning a visit now could greatly differ from a visit in a year, two years and (most definitely) 10 years-time.

An intriguing history and a changing future

Once hailed as a nation frozen in time, Cuba has been experiencing a great number of changes since it re-established diplomatic relations with the United States back in 2014, reopening embassies in both Havana and Washington. This move, orchestrated by Barack Obama and Raúl Castro, essentially opened up the closed-off island to international tourism, with commercial flights between the U.S. and Cuba reinstated for the first time in 50 years. In fact, 2016 saw a U.S.-Cuba civil aviation agreement authorise as many as 110 daily flights between the two countries.



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With this growing accessibility, Cuba's tourism sector has experienced an incredible boom (set out in various phases), with international hotel brands drawing up plans for gigantic resorts within the many coastal areas and numerous urban hubs. Private travel agencies and tour operators have sprung up all over Cuba, following government authorisation, offering multilingual day and overnight trips to tourist hotspots, with many activities designed to enhance contact with Cuban people and support their independence. The implementation of new laws allowing private businesses to operate has seen a further spike in *paladares* (private-run restaurants), Airbnbs, and *casas particulares* (Cuban Bed and Breakfasts). 'Selling Cuba' has become a subject of expanding interest among the Latin American travel industry, and, as such, multi-million-dollar investments and international brand partnerships and collaborations have continued to reshape the nation's economic, political, and cultural scene.

However, with this continuous transformation has come a real fear that Cuba, as it currently stands, will soon change forever, ushering in a mentality that tourists should rush there before it gets spoiled. To visit Cuba is to experience changelessness, to move among people who have been, as popularly described, stuck in a time warp since the 1950s, where conglomerates, billboards, blinding neon lights, and franchises such as McDonald's and Starbucks don't dominate every crumbling corner. It is these defining features that lend Havana, in particular, an undeniable charm, where visitors can experience life as it was lived half a century ago. A living museum, possibly on the cusp of extinction, Havana promises surprises at every turn. Here we round up the top quintessentially Cuban activities to enjoy in the capital, perhaps before the nation evolves and modernises beyond recognition.



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Hop on a classic car tour

One result of Cuba's long-standing communist government has been the inability to import new cars, making way for one of the city's most iconic symbols – strikingly colourful 1950s classic convertibles. From Cadillacs to Fords, Buicks and Chevrolets, and even rarer models from Studebaker and Chrysler, there are countless classics to choose from that will have you exploring the city in the utmost of style. Pre-planned tours typically cost \$40-50 per hour, but you can easily hail a car down anywhere in the centre or find dozens of drivers lined up outside tourist hotspots such as Hotel Inglaterra at Parque Central or the Museum of Revolution. First-class guides provide interesting insights into famous monuments, significant buildings, and lesser-known districts, with plenty of time to stop off and snap shots of Havana's best-loved attractions, including the enormous steel mural of revolutionary hero Che Guevara, found at the Plaza de la Revolución, and the city's most impressive and ornate structure: Capitolio Nacional.



Learn to roll the perfect cigar

Cuban cigars have held the highest world recognition for several decades, praised for their excellent quality and thought of as a 'forbidden fruit' due to the 1961 trade embargo imposed by the U.S. Offering extensive insight into the processes behind one of Cuba's best known cultural symbols, as well as a chance to roll your very own according to intensity preferences, Real Fábrica de Tabacos Partagás, situated in Centro Habana, is one of the city's oldest cigar factories and the only location offering reliable daily tours. Here, visitors can explore the iconic factory dating back to 1845, while learning about the way cigars are made – from the unbundling and sorting of the leaves to the rolling, pressing, and boxing of the product. The attraction also boasts an on-site shop where you can try out and purchase many different cigars, including the Montecristo and Cohiba varieties the factory is responsible for producing.



For those who have more flexibility with their Havana itineraries and wish to delve into every separate stage of cigar production, tour operators also organise day trips to the plantation-rich Pinar del Río region, home to UNESCO-listed Viñales National Park. Comprising rolling green hills, *mogotes* (large limestone cliffs), colourful colonial houses and both tobacco and coffee plantations, this tranquil agricultural province promises the ideal spot to recharge while exploring a different side of Cuba. The plantation tours themselves are typically led by the farmers who live and work on the land, and incorporate a visit to the fields, drying houses, and a mini-workshop during which visitors can hand-roll and taste various cigars, often dipped in locally produced rum and honey. It is also worth noting that as current laws dictate, tobacco farmers must sell 90% of their produce to the government, leaving them with just 10% for their own personal use and for selling to tourists. This means it might be worth holding off on purchasing cigars in the capital and instead opting for high-quality ones from their very source.

Enjoy an evening cabaret under the stars

Havana's most famous old-school cabaret show, *Tropicana*, promises a one-of-a-kind song and dance extravaganza you will most certainly remember. Located in the Miramar neighbourhood, in the eastern suburbs of the city, this open-air nightclub puts on riveting performances every week, with shows taking place amidst the tropical gardens of Villa Mina – it's home since 1939. Watch flamboyant dancers in feather headdresses kick their legs under swaying palms and glistening lights as the live orchestra fills the air with rumbling drums and trilling trumpets. Visitors can choose from a range of tickets, including standard show tickets, which grant entrance to the performance with a welcome drink on arrival, or dinner and show packages which typically add around \$20 per person. Incorporating jugglers, acrobats, solo singers and even comedians, with international guest performers taking centre stage during special events, this spectacular expression of Cuban culture is simply unmissable.



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Dine like a local in a family owned and run paladar

Forming the very foundation of the spirit of entrepreneurship that has been sweeping throughout Havana in the past few years, *paladares* are private-run restaurants set within informal surroundings, typically in Cuban homes. From living rooms to terraces and even balconies, these intimate and characteristically small spaces provide the ultimate gateway into authentic Cuban cuisine, with famed dishes such as *cerdo asado* (roast pork with rice and black beans) and *ropa vieja* (pulled stewed beef with vegetables), often served up home-style in more than generous portions. Not to mention, these cosy establishments warrant a more personal service and are far more accommodating to vegetarians and vegans, unlike state-run restaurants, which do not encourage ordering off-menu.

Having made a name for itself as the filming location for the only Cuban film to be nominated for an Oscar (*Fresa y Chocolate*), La Guardia, situated in Centro Habana, is undisputedly the city's most renowned paladar, with a diverse menu centred on fresh seafood specialities. Other foodie hotspots include Ivan Chef Justo, where the innovative and continuously changing menu focuses on Cuban fusion food, Doña Eutimia, where guests can enjoy *tamal* (a Mesoamerican dish dating back to the Aztecs), and San Cristóbal, where traditional pork and chicken dishes reign supreme.



Share your stay with friendly Havana residents at a casa particular

Cuba's equivalent of a bed and breakfast, *casa particulares* are the most common and authentic form of accommodation within the capital. These private houses are licensed by the government under strict conditions and have evolved greatly over the years to include a wide range of options – from full houses and separate units to rooms in Cuban family homes. Their defining, and best-loved, feature is that they remain shared, with eager residents opening up both their homes and their hearts to visitors, providing the perfect opportunity to join in on family meals and friendly weekend get-togethers.



There are a number of advantages that come with choosing to stay at a *casa particular* over a Cuban chain hotel. For starters, as your hosts have most likely lived in a specific neighbourhood for several years, they are sure to have a wealth of helpful tips and recommendations to make your visit all that more special. Staying at a *casa particular* is also not especially expensive, with the price of a room per night costing an average of \$20-40. Yet, this seemingly low rate benefits small business owners greatly, allowing residents to supplement their income, which has remained what many would consider to be very low due to the continuance of government rationing. As such, running a *casa particular* has also become especially common amongst Havana's inhabitants, meaning there is a range of location options to choose from, depending on where you would prefer to base yourself or which part of the city you want to focus on exploring. The hospitality aspect goes without saying – Cubans are simply unmatched in their ability to welcome guests and immerse them in the best of everyday life.

While *casa particulares* can be found by simply asking around (notably in Habana Vieja, you will find locals advertising their homes right on the street), it is best to book such accommodation at least one week in advance during non-peak seasons, and around two or three months before during the peak summer months. One private residence that stands out within the sea of options is Casa Particular Idania. Located on Habana Vieja's central street, Calle Obispo, this beautiful colonial-style home ensures you remain at the heart of it all, with prime tourist attractions such as Parque Central and Plaza de la Catedral only steps away. Adapted to meet modern needs, each of the casa's four rooms, as well as the extra-privacy offering studio, features a queen-sized bed, fridge, TV, air conditioning system and a private bathroom. The residence's most striking detail is its bright and colourful mosaic tiles which stretch across the first floor to the outside terrace where guests can enjoy freshly prepared breakfast, as well as stunning views of El Capitolio's golden dome. Wi-Fi can additionally be accessed upon request and at an extra charge.

GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic offer direct flights to Havana's Jos Mart International Airport (HAV) from London Heathrow (LHR) twice a week throughout the year. For more information or to make a reservation, visit: www.virginatlantic.com

