

AT HOME IN... HAVANA

There's plenty of inspiring vintage interiors to be found in the Cuban capital, says Claire Boobyer

Foreign encounters, a love affair with sugar cane and a lust for American leisure time have all hallmarked Havana's streets. Beautifully restored homes, churches and institutions embellished with ornate Andalusian architectural flourishes – balconies, grilles and Moorish arches – speak of the Spanish conquistadors, who founded the city circa 1519. Rambling neo-classical mansions tell of the sugar barons who made their millions here in the 19th century, when Cuba produced one third of the world's sweet stuff. And lavish, mob-funded hotels

and once-glitzy nightclubs and cabarets evoke the heady days of the 1950s when American tourists flocked here to drink Bacardi, play in the casinos, and see shows by the likes of Nat King Cole and Carmen Miranda.

But since Fidel Castro marched into Havana in January 1959, many remarkable buildings have fallen victim to neglect, slapped with a daily drubbing of salt-laden wind and burning sun. While *la Habana Vieja* (the old town) has been given a facelift, elsewhere the paint is peeling, streets are lacerated, and the 1950s Fords and Chevys, ►



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Reminders of the revolution are never far away in Cuba; the salon at Villa Portería; vintage barbers' objects at the Casa Museo de la Barbería; Havana's Vedado district; a *medio punto* on the Palacio del Marqués de Arcos; the living room in Delta and Douglas Pagán's home

tend to limp rather than cruise. Given the city's air of decay, you'd be forgiven for thinking its interiors were similarly impoverished, but often nothing is further from the truth. Hiding behind the distressed doorways and cracked *medio puntos* (half-moon stained-glass windows) of Havana's *casas particulares*, 'homestays' where travellers can rent rooms, are some extraordinary interiors.

Take the home of former pharmacist Luis Miguel Ulacia, a relative of trumpeter Andrés Castro, one of the original members of La Orquesta Hermanos Castro, Cuba's first jazz band. Located in rundown Centro, a tightly packed grid of age-wracked dwellings and tenements studded with art deco detail that's often described as looking like a war zone, the building's facade gives no clue as to what lies inside. But behind louvered windows and through colonial-era *mamparas* (carved wooden and glass half-doors) a different world unfolds.

STEP BACK IN TIME

The front salon, where the Castro's music fills the air, is dominated by Louis XV-style furniture bought for 400 pesos in the 1940s (worth around CUC\$4,000 today, 18-and-a-half times the average Cuban annual salary). There are dressers laden with Baccarat crystal, old photographs, an art nouveau pewter cigarette case, a miniature art deco chain-mail purse, a 1940s bronze cigar stand and ashtray, and a 1910 Victrola gramophone that once plays the records of Cuban king of pop, Beny Moré. 'I've been a crazy collector all my life,' says Luis, cigar in hand. 'I have a picture of me in my cot when I was five with my collection of postcards. Now I collect everything and



CLAIRE BOBBYER

people give me presents knowing I love things.'

His growing collection has spilled beyond the salon to the patio, which showcases a glittering 1940s bronze till, a 1930s water heater and his newest fad: 1950s memorabilia. Chips from infamous mafia-run casinos Capri and Sans Souci; old commercial Coca Cola and Guarina ice cream signs; Bacardi cocktail sticks once swizzled by American tourists, and preserved paper bags from elegant 1950s department stores, El Encanto and Fin de Siglo evoke a world that disappeared the day Fidel's revolutionaries

‘The distressed doorways of Havana’s ‘homestays’ hide extraordinary interiors’

rolled into town. His next must-have? A 1950s jukebox.

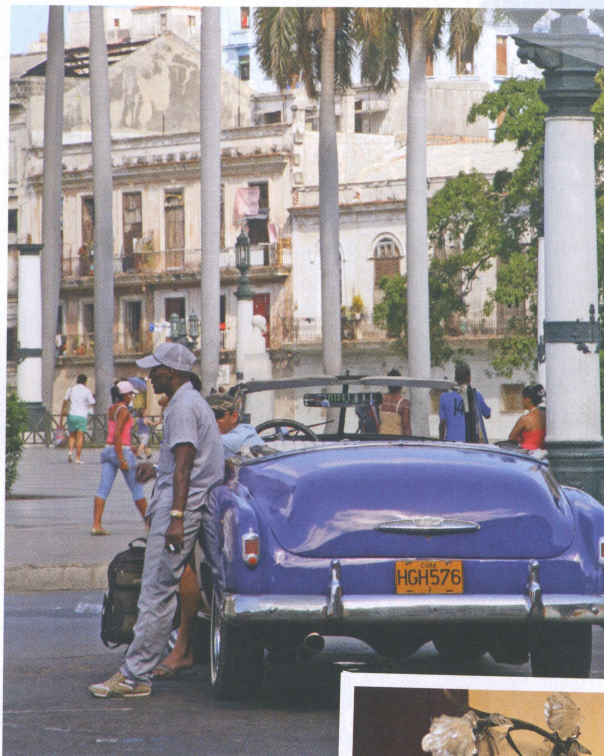
West across town in Vedado – a district of bougainvillea-covered mansions built by Havana's plantocracy – live Delta and Douglas Pagán. Over a seafood lunch, Delta, named after the American power tools company recalls what happened after 1959. The government 'left people's furniture and homes alone', but her family lost its furniture business. Cubans were marshalled to work for the socialist revolution: Delta got a job with the national airline, Cubana, while her father worked in a hospital as a carpenter. 'People had no money, the economy was run down and it was a difficult time,' she recalls.

FADED GRANDEUR

This lack of money has played a part in preserving these 'time-capsule' interiors. Today, the Pagán's 1925 home (also a *casa particular*) is decorated with the grand remnants of the family business: Chippendale chairs, a German grandfather clock, English porcelain, a Sino-European desk and a curvaceous opaline French lamp. 'Today we live in the past, all of us are antiques here,' jokes Delta. 'But we live in the past with beautiful things.'

Also in Vedado is spacious **Villa Portería**, built in 1959 and belonging to ex-economist Alexis López Hernández. His fine taste is showcased throughout, with art nouveau pieces, ceramics, contemporary art, sculpture and glassware all vying for attention. Alexis' favourite pieces are 1950s Cuban ceramics, and original works by prize-winning artists René Portocarrero, Amelia Peláez, and Wifredo Lam fill his cabinets and walls. But Alexis has an eye for quirky items too: a 19th-century Spanish doll; a dentist's ancient pedal-powered air tool; and a boat-shaped brick by Cuba's hottest contemporary artist, Kcho.

Works by many of the artists featured in Alexis's home can be seen in the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes** (Calle Trocadero, La Habana Vieja), but several other of Havana's museums also give a glimpse into the city's astonishing –

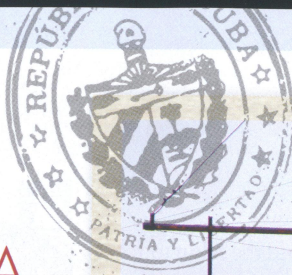


ABOVE A vintage car in the old town
RIGHT An art nouveau lamp in Luis Miguel Ulacia's *casa particular*. In the 1990s, when Cuba's financial lifeline was yanked away as the Soviet Union dissolved, small private businesses like this were encouraged as a way of bringing in much-needed hard currency. Many of their owners have become comparatively rich, enabling them to restore their homes



and often astonishingly rich – interiors. In Vedado, the **Museo de Artes Decorativas** (Calle 17 #502 between Calles D and E), a 1920s mansion, bursts with pan-European and Chinese artistry, with luxe exhibits that belonged to María Luísa Gómez Mena, sister of sugar baron José Gómez-Mena Vila. The **Museo Napoleónico** (Calle San Miguel #1159, Vedado), housed in a restored 1928 Florentine-style mansion, displays the obsession of Cuba's biggest sugar king, Julio Lobo, and – in among statues and paintings – features the French emperor's death mask.

But if you only have time for one memorable visit, make it the extraordinary **Casa Museo de la Barbería** (ArteCorte, Calle Aguiar #10, La Habana Vieja), a hairdressing salon in a converted colonial apartment on the edge of Old Havana. Here, in a vintage barber's chair, owner Papito will lop your locks among barbers' poles, gilded mirrors, and an eye-popping array of artwork – not to mention beautifully preserved old brushes, jars, and hairdryers. It might not be a look you'd want to recreate at home but, in terms of inspiration, it's a sure-fire winner. ➤



VINTIQUING IN HAVANA

Consider the export licence before buying vintage in Cuba

The best places to find curios, stamps, records, cameras, coins, and revolution and colonial-era memorabilia are the stalls in the **Fin de Siglo**, Calles San Rafael y Aguila, Centro Habana (11am-5pm, daily) and the second-hand book and curios market on the **Plaza de Armas**, Old Havana (9am-6pm daily; best months Oct-Mar). The **Librería Victoria**, 266 Calle Obispo, Old Havana (9am-5pm daily) also sells books, old posters and maps.

Taking objects out of the country can be fraught with difficulty. The following items cannot be exported: Cuban books and manuscripts dated 1440-1500 and from the 18th century; *incunabula* (printed before 1501); books edited during the revolution (*ediciones 'R'*); foreign books (dated 16th-18th century); library books; furniture; and, most ambiguously for the collector, 'anything declared part of the cultural patrimony of Cuba'. As Cuban author Pedro Juan Gutiérrez wrote in *Our GG in Havana*: 'In Cuba nothing is exact.' If you're not sure, the **Registro de Bienes Culturales**, Calle 17 #1009 between Calle 10 and 12 (+53 7833 9658; Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12pm, Sept-July), governs export. Photographs of goods prior to purchase are examined by experts in a review that takes one week. If an export licence is granted, it costs between CUC\$10-30 (£6-18).

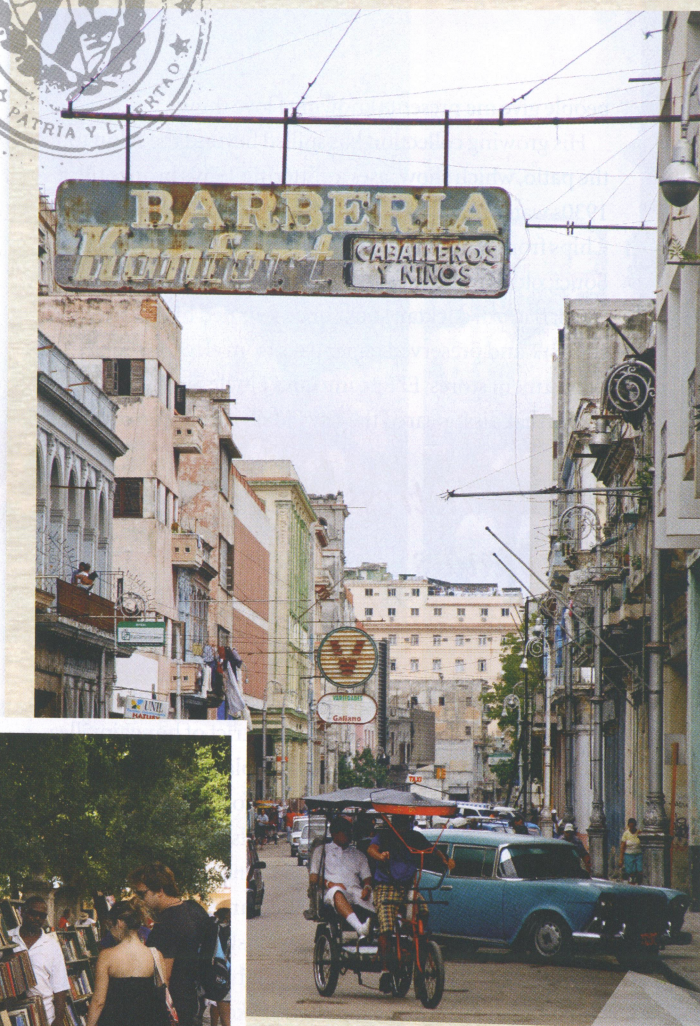
The annual November auction, 'Subasta Habana' (subastahabana.com), allows pre-cleared antiques to be bought in euros and exported. The 11th **Havana Biennial** (bienalhabana.cult.cu), to be held May-June 2012, offers rich rewards to art collectors. Important works (sold most notably through the government-approved Genesis gallery group, galeriascubanas.com) must be licensed for export although galleries will help buyers with this process.

NEED TO KNOW...

TOURS

● **Esencia Experiences** (esenciaexperiences.com) offers guided tours to some of the city's most interesting interiors, including the *casas particulares* mentioned here, the antique hairdressing salon and an artist's home. Price: US\$200 per person (two people minimum) for a full day tour, including lunch, English-speaking guide, car and driver.

If you are planning a visit to Havana, it's worth noting that most museums are closed on Mondays.



Travellers' Notes

Virgin Atlantic (virgin-atlantic.com) and Cubana (cubana.cu) fly direct from London.

Where to Stay Casa Delta

(Calle D #501 between Calles 21 and 23,

Vedado, +53 7832 9078). **Casa Luis Miguel**

Ulacia (Casa 1932, Calle Campanario #63

bajos, ground floor, between Calles San Lázaro and Lagunas, Centro Habana,

+53 7863 6203, casahabana.net).

Villa Portería (Calle 4 #310 between Calles 13 and 15, Vedado, +53 7833 8670).

Old Havana hotels with character can be booked through habaguanex.cu/hotels/

Where to Eat La Guarida (Calle Concordia #418 between Calles Gervasio and Escobar, Centro Habana, +53 7866 9047, laguarida.com), delicious fine dining on a famous film set.

Café Laurent (Calle M #257 between Calles 19 and 21, Vedado, +53 7832 6890),

penthouse dining. **San Cristóbal** (Calle San Rafael #469, between Calles Lealtad and Campanario, Centro Habana,

+53 5292 1305), fine dining amid antiques.

