

# ODYSSEY

THE MAGAZINE OF DISCOVERY FROM NOBLE CALEDONIA

## PARADISE FOUND

Encounter the exotic wildlife of the *Indian Ocean*

WIN A CRUISE ALONG THE CROATIAN COAST

PLUS WHISKY GALORE IN THE HEBRIDES THE COLOURS OF CUBA D-DAY LANDINGS: 70 YEARS ON

### The far side of the world

Explore the varied landscapes of dramatic New Zealand

### ICE MAJESTY

A TRIBUTE TO THE GREAT POLAR EXPLORERS

BOOK CLUB: INDIA • THE WORLD'S BEST BARS • MUSICAL INTERLUDES • THE DANUBE

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Summer 2013

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**From top to bottom:**

Wine & food lovers

Special wildlife interest

History buffs

Fans of the natural world

## Our contributors

The leading travel writers who have authored our features this issue



**ADRIAN MOURBY** is a writer and producer. On page 16 he revels in the pleasures of sailing on the Indian Ocean



**ADRIAN BRIDGE** enjoys drama on a grand scale as he circumnavigates New Zealand (page 24)



**CLAIRE BOOBYER** is a travel writer and photographer with a passion for intoxicating Cuba. See page 28



**CAROLINE COURTAULD** shares her long-time passion with golden Burma on page 44



**HUMPHREY BURTON** offers his thoughts on a selection of forthcoming musical tours (page 48)



**ROBERT HANBURY-TENISON** is an explorer of the world's most remote places (page 34)



**MIKE DEEGAN** is Fleet Operations Manager for Noble. He writes about the Hebrides on page 56



# TREASURE ISLANDS

Cuba expert **Claire Boobyer** follows the pirates, playboys and rebels that have claimed this intoxicating island



*CLAIRE BOOBYER is a travel writer, photographer and editor who specialises in writing about Cuba. She first went to Cuba in 1998 to celebrate Christmas Day*

**C**HRISTOPHER COLUMBUS knew a good thing when he saw it. The Admiral of the Ocean Sea was rapturous when he sighted Cuba, believing it to be the coast of Japan – the target of his royal-sanctioned mission.

His boat, the Santa María, sails billowing in the West Indies wind, first sighted Cuban land in 1492 on the north-east coast of this crocodile-shaped isle. The exact spot is disputed by Cubans but his diary entry revealed that he found the Caribbean island “so enchantingly beautiful that it surpasses all others in charm and beauty...” Indeed, Cuba was so alluring that he actually navigated through its coral islands some three times in search of those elusive Oriental shores and the lucrative East Indies spice trade.

It’s surprising, then, that perambulating the island on a pleasure boat has not been a more common and available pursuit. Due to political constraints it’s only been in the last few years that organised long cruises around Cuba have been possible, which is why it’s so fascinating to follow Cuba’s pioneering sailors and buccaneers, including Spanish conquistador Diego de Velázquez, who was given the task of founding seven towns in Cuba. The Spaniards believed that Cuba must be richly seamed in ore-bearing gold. Cuba’s earth didn’t relinquish any mineral riches to the conquerors but the bay of Carena, at Havana, grew into one of the most important staging posts for the Spanish treasure fleets. At Havana, boats were careened before Spanish sea dogs sailed their ships across the Atlantic Ocean to unload

their plundered silver and gold at the royal court in Seville.



WITH SO much New World wealth tumbling out of the Spanish galleon hulls, it’s no surprise that Cuba fell under the radar of sea-roving pirates. The MS Island Sky’s route along the western coast of Cuba follows the trail of many infamous buccaneers, including Sir Francis Drake, William Dampier and Henry Morgan, among others, in their search for these ransacked riches. These salty rogues salivated at the thought of so much glittering loot and set to work attacking ships in their midst. Drake had already prowled around Havana’s harbour on several occasions in the 16th century, sniffing the silver-lined air.

A coastal journey goes past Cayo Levisa, a tiny island of cabañas, ➔





## “A lively salsa dancing scene lures visitors out into the balmy tropical nights among the porticos and the alfresco plazas”

► bounded by sapphire seas, and close to where American novelist Ernest Hemingway used to fish, the Cape of San Antonio – Cuba’s most far-flung tip. This little-visited raggedy peninsula is cut through with dog’s teeth (sharp-featured limestone platforms) and is home to bounding wild deer, hummingbirds and honeybees. Rounding this remote western tip is the Bay of Currents whose coastline is creased with the soft white sparkling sand of María La Gorda, one of Cuba’s most popular dive and snorkel spots. Legend relates that María La Gorda (translation: ‘Fat Mary’) was a buxom wench who serviced passing sailors and pirates in a bygone era.

From María La Gorda, the ship voyages through low-slung coral islands scattered in the aquamarine Caribbean before

reaching the Isle of Youth (Isla de la Juventud). This curious, comma-shaped island dangling off the southern coast of Cuba was hijacked as a pirate’s lair for centuries. Legend relates that it was Robert Louis Stevenson’s location for *Treasure Island*, and Spanish wrecks sunk off its western coast fuel the folklore. Its tiny capital, Nueva Gerona, famous for its grapefruit-based pinerito cocktail, sits close to the giant panopticon prison (now a museum) where Fidel Castro languished for two years after attacking Santiago’s Moncada barracks in 1953 in a bid to topple Cuba’s dictator Batista.

Before a total immersion in Spanish colonial culture at Trinidad, there’s time for a French foray at Cienfuegos, a columned city of pastel colours founded by the French in 1819. In the



### ELEGANTLY WASTED

**THE CENTRE** of Cuba’s capital, Old Havana, is surely one of the most beautiful urban districts in the world. Known for its 16th- and 17th-century architecture, it suits being slightly decrepit, which gives it a fabulous salty air – that ruinous Graham Greene glamour. There are some 144 grand houses from the 16th and 17th centuries in Old Havana and 200 from the 18th century – indeed, there are 900 important buildings in Old Havana alone, let alone the rest of the city. And those patched-up Buicks and Cadillacs look terrific in front of peeling walls of ancient

paint. But these old buildings are in peril, with about three old properties being lost daily.

**AS THE MOST** architecturally important Caribbean city of all, Old Havana became a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1982, but the adjective ‘crumbling’ is still applied liberally to the Cuban capital. It’s partly the weather, which is cruel to the coral limestone building stock; also the lack of maintenance. While Fidel Castro’s socialism kept them alive by neglect, demolition being too expensive, it also couldn’t supply the

goods for maintenance and many remain derelict and in multiple occupation. Chickens scratch around in old palaces, and extra floors are added on, piecemeal – typically, residents would bung in an extra mezzanine floor, which gets so hot they call it the ‘barbecue’.

A company, Habaguanex, was started in 1994, a kind of National Trust, the idea being to filter hard currency into regeneration. Now, a freer market in building materials has been opened, to try and restore these grand old buildings. Let’s hope it’s in time to help save this glorious city.



## Just back

**Pierre Thomas, Noble Caledonia Guest Speaker, has just returned from a scouting trip to Cuba**

"I have travelled extensively through Latin America, from El Salvador to Patagonia over the Galápagos, but this trip didn't prepare me for what I was going to experience in the largest and most populated Island of the Caribbean.

"The architecture of the capital city Havana is like nowhere else in Latin America: it has a high concentration of colonial, neo-Classical and Art Deco buildings – as well as those buildings that have clearly been inspired by the former Soviet Union. Transportation in Havana impressed me, and I am sure the Cuban capital probably has one of the highest concentrations of old-timer cars in the world.

"During my journey, Cuba highlights included: Havana, Cienfuegos and Trinidad where time stood still; Santiago de Cuba, the birthplace of Cuba's most prominent musicians; and some natural wonders such as the Caribbean's best-preserved coral reefs."

Moorish fantasia that is the Palacio del Valle on Punta Gorda, María del Carmen Iznaga Guillén, niece of the famous Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, tinkles on the piano at lunch and dinner. Punta Gorda itself trails off to a tiny point, dotted with colourful Caribbean gingerbread houses.

Diminutive Trinidad, founded in 1514, is a time-warped town built with a bundle of stunning architectural flourishes. During the 18th century, the neighbouring Valley of the Sugar Mills ripened cane that filled the coffers of the area's sugar barons. Some 12,000 slaves worked the

75 plantations and their Spanish owners grew fabulously rich. This wealth is reflected in the outstandingly beautiful mansions and plazas that straddle whole city blocks in the winding cobblestoned streets. Declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1988, a lively salsa dancing scene lures visitors out into the

**Previous page:** Colourful classic cars in front of the National Capitol Building in Havana **This page, clockwise from top left:** Steep limestone hills called mogotes are a striking feature of the small municipality of Viñales, as are crops of prime Cuban tobacco; Santiago de Cuba is the island's second largest city and an important sea port; this colourful street scene is typical of the Spanish-founded town of Trinidad

balmy tropical nights among the porticos and the alfresco plazas.

Outside of Havana, Trinidad is one of the few places to really benefit from President Raúl Castro's economic reforms. Just three years ago, Trinidad offered a mere three private pop-up dining establishments; now there are more than 60 *paladares*, or private restaurants. In late 2010, in a bid to boost his country's dire economic straits, Castro permitted Cubans to start running their own businesses in 178 job categories. This deregulation has enabled Cubans like Julio Muñoz to ➔



The Isle de Juventud is home to the Punta Frances National Marine Park

► benefit from these reforms. Now he runs a beautiful Cuban B&B in his family's 1800-vintage mansion, along with horse riding excursions, horse-whispering classes and street photography tours. The Island Sky continues east past the Ancón beach peninsula and the ancient port of Casilda from where Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés sailed for Mexico in 1518. As she cruises beneath the bulging southern coastline of Cuba, she weaves through the island's most outstanding coral archipelago – the protected Gardens of the Queen (Jardines de la Reina). These 250 tiny, uninhabited virginal coral atolls are sprinkled across perfect turquoise seas and fringed by red mangrove where turtles, dolphins, whale sharks and goliath groupers swim.



ROUNDING THE Granma province peninsula, the raw, sheer sides of the Sierra Maestra mountains can be seen towering over the indigo and black waters that swirl along this wild coast. At the bay of Santiago, the 17th-century monumental El Morro fortress provides a fearsome guard.

Santiago is tangled compared to most other places in Cuba

— literally, in its enmeshed streets; and metaphorically in its musical heritage and population of Spanish, African and Haitian refugee origin. I've been to Santiago a dozen times to learn to dance salsa and *son* (a musical genre that predates salsa), and to generally party and conga, and be initiated into the mysteries of Santería, the Afro-Cuban religion syncretised with Roman Catholicism. There's something enigmatic and seductive about this city, a combination of the hypnotic sounds of percussive rhythms, the musical riot of conga, the melodic moves of *son* and salsa; and the idiosyncracies of a belief that combines African deities and Roman Catholic saints.

Fidel Castro knew about Santiago's intangible allure when he chose it to make his victory speech there in January 1959, heralding the beginning of his rebel-fought grassroots Cuban Revolution, and promising that Cuba's second city would become the capital of his new republic. It didn't, but it is part of the intoxicating mix on this fascinating and contested island. ●

## Ready to go

Everything you need to know

### *A Cuban Odyssey*

8-20 March 2014, 12 nights from £5,595

> Aboard the MS Island Sky

Feast upon the pulsating colours and rhythms of this fascinating and controversial Caribbean island.



### *In the spotlight*

Explore Hemingway's Cuba. Visit his *finca* (estate) in **San Francisco de Paula** and the Ernest Hemingway Museum. Later, call into **Cojimar Village**, the inspiration for his book, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

### *Excursion highlights*

A taste of the excursions available on this tour...

**Havana:** Explore Old Havana's twisting, cobbled streets that lead to beautifully restored Baroque churches, castles and palaces.

**Isla de Juventud:** Located some 50 miles from Cuba's south coast, this attractive island is famous for its beaches, coral reefs and densely forested hills.

**Little Cayman:** First discovered in 1503 by Christopher Columbus, this is one of the most unspoilt and least developed parts of the Caribbean.

### *Similar tours of interest...*

**Island hopping in the Caribbean** Join us on our island hopping adventure through the Caribbean Sea aboard the MS Island Sky. We will explore some of the most beautiful tropical isles, many still untouched by the hands of tourism. Departs on 19 March 2014, 15 nights from £6,195.

**Lost Islands, Lost Worlds** Enjoy reefs, rainforests and ruins as you voyage along the Caribbean Sea coast of Central America from Costa Rica to Cuba aboard Sea Cloud II. Also visit little-known island territories of Colombia and Honduras, the reefs and atolls of Belize and ancient Mayan sites of Belize and Mexico. Departs 26 January 2014, 14 nights from £7,295.

For full details go to [www.noble-caledonia.co.uk](http://www.noble-caledonia.co.uk)