



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | HOT-STUFF HAVANA



instant escapes

Hot-stuff Havana

Cuba? Sleepy? Not its buzzing capital, baby. This place sizzles with life!

The sexiest city in the Caribbean has always had an edgy, dishevelled glamour and a thrill of cultural creativity. But these days its steamy allure comes with the extra *chispa* (spark) of entrepreneurship. Look between the ramshackle mansions and sharp-angled Communist monuments and you'll find funky galleries and rooftop bars. **By Claire Boobyer**



SEE & DO

Old Havana's streets might be antique but, boy, have they still got it, **popping with pastel pinks, peaches and pistachio**. So take time to admire the Spanish colonial palaces, Art Deco homes and Neo-Classical piles, and walk between the main cobbled squares: Plaza de San Francisco de Asís (1 on map) for its 18th-century basilica; Plaza Vieja (2) for coiffured beauty; Plaza de Armas (3) for the opulent Palace of the Captains General; and Plaza de la Catedral (4) for nobles' mansions and its asymmetric church.

In untouristy San Isidro barrio, along streets once rude with pimps and prostitutes, you'll find the city's most happening art. Cuban film actor, Jorge Perugorria, has opened Galería Taller Gorria (galeriatallergorria.com; 5) and encouraged street artists to decorate the district's flaking walls. Wander among vibrant spray-painted murals and poignant pieces of social commentary; check @sanisidro on Instagram for regular events.

Havana flourished with profits from sugar, rum and tobacco, so it's no surprise the cocktail culture is liberal. Order the refreshing vodka-based Raining Geisha at El del Frente (Calle O'Reilly 303e/Habana y Aguiar; 6); the passion-fruit cocktail at Michifú (Calle Concordia; 7); and a classic Daiquiri at Jesús María 20 (same address; 8).

Looking for a perfectly photogenic sunset? Wander along Centro Habana's

RIDE OF YOUR LIFE
Fancy a spin in one of those vintage motors? Pick from the cluster in Central Park, where you can haggle on price (aim for about £20 an hour)

Mind-blowing: a trombone player hits the right note on the Malecón; below, a salsa concert at Casa de la Música; chill-out time at Plaza Vieja

curving concrete walkway, the Malecón, lined with salt-nibbled ornamental windows and doors. As the sun spills gold over the Atlantic, **snap trumpet players, fishermen, lovers and the chrome fins of dolly-mixture Detroit cars** as they cruise by. Climb to the rooftop terrace of Malecón 663 (malecon663.com; 9) for sundowners.

The glowing embers of a good cigar are where luxury symbols meet socialist Cuba. Partagás Factory (San Carlos 816e/Peñalver y Sitios; £8; 10) is the only one properly open to visitors: **watch the selection, de-veining and rolling of leaves into Cohibas and Montecristos**, shrouded in a fug of nicotine. Then let a sommelier talk you through a rum-and-cigar pairing at Kempinski's modern tobacco lounge (kempinski.com; £24; 11).

The monumental, wedding-cake-white Capitol building, recently decorated with a gold cupola like an armoured bosom, is newly open for tours (Paseo de Martí; £8; 12). Go for the history as well as the jaw-dropping interiors: there's the blinging bronze Statue of the Republic in tunic and helmet, **luminous marble Hall of the Lost Steps and a rare statue of the devil in an interior courtyard**.

Pulsating with salsa, reggaeton, son cubano, electronic and fusion, Havana's music scene is as hot as ever. Different haunts host various artists, so you'll need cubanessjournal.com for events listings. You might dance to kings of timba Havana d'Primera at Miramar's Casa de la Música (Calle 20, 3308 esq 35; £8; 13) or Club 1830 (Ave Malecón y Calle 22; £4; 14); or hear fusion maestros Interactivo at Bertolt Brecht (Calle 13 cnr Calle 1; £4; 15) and sizzling Afro-Cuban funk artist Cimafunk at Fábrica de Arte Cubano (Calle 26, cnr 11; £1.50; fac.cu; 16).

Beach time! The best within reach of the city is Santa María del Mar (17). **Hire a sunlounger and sip a Piña Colada at the no-name shack.** There's no decent lunch spot, so grab a picnic in town from El Café (Amargura 358e/Villegas y Aguacate; about £7; 18). Get there using the door-to-door Habana Bus Tour service from Central Park, opposite Hotel Inglaterra (£3.20 return; 19). >



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EAT

● **Arty lunch spot**

BELVIEW ART CAFE (Mains about £5)

Because: This cafe in a chic colonial villa serves fresh-to-order crepes, coffee and a rocking Mamey (pink tropical fruit) milkshake. **Travel's tip:** Fancy cafe-hopping? Nearby Casa de la Amistad is a glorious pink confection. Calle 6 412, cnr of 19; 00 53 7832 5429; @.

● **Gourmet breakfast**

SALCHIPIZZA (Breakfast £6)

Because: Alberto Gonzalez Ceballos, former head chef at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Italy, came home to open this bakery. Start the day here with the likes of fried duck and quail eggs, homemade bread and herb butters.

Travel's tip: Finish off with ice cream (big in Cuba). Top emporium Monte Freddo is a few minutes' walk away. Infanta 562e/Valle y Zapata; 00 53 52818792; @.

● **Vegetarian specialties**

HECHO EN CASA (Mains about £9)

Because: Charming chef-owner Alina Menéndez Lamas cooks fresh, organic garden-to-table dishes — vegetarian moussaka and a killer Cuban chocolate ice cream. Book ahead. **Travel's tip:** Pick up local cheese from Alina's deli. Calle 14 no 511e/5ta y 7ma; 00 53 7202 5392, hechoencasacuba.com; @.

● **Glam fine dining**

OTRAMANERA (Mains about £10)

Because: This fashionable spot offers Mediterranean-rooted food with a Cuban touch: meaty lamb burgers, velvety guava panna cotta, plus a wine list from the Spanish sommelier co-owner. **Travel's tip:** A great dining spot before or after a concert at nearby Casa de la Música. Calle 35 no 1810e/20 y 41; 00 53 7203 8315, otramanageralahavana.com/en; @.

● **Cuban classics**

IVAN CHEFS JUSTO (Mains about £16)

Because: Slow-roasted suckling pig is the national dish and this colonial home serves the best in Havana. It's what you'd expect from chefs who cooked for Castro. **Travel's tip:** Chef Iván Rodríguez offers tailored half-day cooking classes in his kitchen (£35). Aguacate 9e/Chacón y Tejadillo; 00 53 7863 9697, ivanchef.com; @.

SHOPPING SPREE

Near El Dandy are some of Havana's coolest stores: Clandestina (Villegas 403) for bargain designer totes and T-shirts, and Experimental Gallery for graphic posters and curios (321 Armagura y Aguacate)

JUST NEARBY...

The Museum of Fine Arts is across the road. Go for Afro-Cuban imagery by Manuel Mendive, Pop Art from Raúl Martínez and the homoeroticism of Servando Cabrera Moreno

LOCAL BARS

● **Hip sundowners**

EL DEL FRENTE

Because: The city's coolest vibe is right here on this rooftop bar, along with brilliant cocktails. **Travel's tip:** You can eat here, too; try the superb *tostones pelotones* (ceviche on fried plantain with beetroot and sesame; £6). O'Reilly 303e/Habana y Aguiar; @.

● **Colonial cocktails**

EL DANDY

Because: This boho street-corner watering hole in a colonial home is prime people-watching territory. **Travel's tip:** The Daiquiri is a killer (in a good way). Calle Brasil (Teniente Rey) 401e/Villegas & Cristo, Plaza del Cristo; bareldandy.com; @.

● **Well-mixed mocktails**

JIBARO

Because: A rustic hole-in-the-wall joint, framed by street art, it serves up booze and Havana's best mocktails: try the deeply refreshing Pink Ale. **Travel's tip:** Boxing is big news in Cuba. Catch future champs training at the Rafael Trejoro ring around the corner. Merced 69e/Cuba y San Ignacio; @.

ASK THE LOCAL

Habanera Patricia Santa Coloma is a film-script supervisor and founder of independent media outfit Producciones Almendares

“If your hotel doesn't offer breakfast, try Lo de Monik (Chacón esq Compostela; £4; @) for great-value fresh fruit, breads and rich coffee. Under-the-radar Grados (Calle E 562e/23 y 25; mains about £9; @) is my favourite for lunch: chef-owner Raulito Bazuk shows off authentic Cuban cuisine — try the callaloo with steamed dumplings. The Kohly district is out of the tourist zone, but it's stuffed with the elegant '40s homes of Cuba's bourgeoisie — go for a stroll. By night, squeeze in with the fans at singer-songwriter Ray Fernández's weekly show at the Casa de la Música @, followed by late-night dancing at EFE Bar (Calle 23e/E y F; @).



STAY

● **Hip family homestay**

CASA LILLY (Doubles from £30, room only)

Because: You'll get as much comfort, space and luxury as you would in more expensive boutique stays at this traditional *casa particular* (guesthouse) in leafy Vedado. **Travel's tip:** Tap your host, Lilly, for advice: she has her finger firmly on the cultural pulse. Ave de los Presidentes 301 apto 13e/13 y 15; airbnb.co.uk/rooms/5917779; @.

● **Arty urban loft**

CASAVIVA HAVANA (Doubles from £38, room only)

Because: Decorated with bold works by the young owners' arty friends, this compact hideaway with kitchenette is located in the heart of the city, bordering Old Havana. **Travel's tip:** More than two of you? Book the one-bed mezzanine loft with an interconnecting door to the adjoining two-roomed flat; from £103 for the complete space. Paseo del Prado 609 apto 312; airbnb.com/h/casavivahavana; @.

● **Stylish welcome**

PASEO PENTHOUSE (Doubles from £146, B&B)

Because: Seamless hospitality is the modus operandi of the couple running this spacious, mid-century-looking joint. Take breakfast on the terrace or on the sunny roof with bird's-eye views of the swanky neighbourhood. **Travel's tip:** International data-roaming is complicated in Cuba. Here, though, a hassle-free 4G-fitted smartphone is lent to guests — great for reservations and listings. Paseo cnr Calle 13; elpaseopenthouse.com; @.

● **Garden villa chic**

LA RESERVA (Doubles from £146, B&B)

Because: The 11 arty, antiques bedrooms in these gorgeous neighbouring colonial villas are arranged around a sociable, secluded patio. **Travel's tip:** Take the hotel's insider behind-the-scenes film, artist studios' or chef-led food tours, from £35. Calle 2 508e/21 y 23 Vedado; estampa.cuba.com/lareservavedado-us; @.



WRITER'S TIP

Arranging accommodation in Havana can be hard work, but cubatravelnetwork.com (for hotels) and cuba.casa.co.uk (for homestays) have live availability, which makes things easier

Trueromance: clockwise from top left, an airy bedroom at Loma del Angel; cocktail hour at El Dandy; La Reserva's bedrooms rock an arty vibe; enjoy breakfast feasts at Lo de Monik; Belview Art Cafe

● **Colonial glamour**

GARDENS (Two two-bedroom floors from £200, B&B)

Because: Set in a funky corner of Old Havana, you can either rent the two floors separately — with shared use of the living and dining rooms and bijou patio — or take over the whole house. Swan about, play on the vintage piano and mix drinks at the honesty bar. **Travel's tip:** The concierge loves a challenge — ask him to arrange a picnic and vintage-car trip to his favourite secret beach, from £91 for four people. Villegas 463; gardens.havana.com; @.

● **Romantic bolthole**

LOMA DEL ANGEL (Doubles from £255, B&B)

Because: This is the sumptuous colonial hideaway of your dreams: just two roomy suites, with large gold and white bathrooms, in a soothing monochrome palette. The very generous breakfast is served on vintage crockery. **Travel's tip:** Book the Terrace Suite to take tea alfresco listening to Sunday bells. Calle Cuarteles 104; lomadelangel.com; @.

GET ME THERE
GO INDEPENDENT

Virgin Atlantic flies from Gatwick from £668 return. Air Europa flies via Madrid from £596 return. Air France-KLM flies via Paris and Amsterdam from £812 return.

GO PACKAGED

Cuba Private Travel (cubaprivatetravel.com) has seven days in Havana staying at Gardens, including a private guide and tours, from £1,999pp, B&B, with return Gatwick or Heathrow flights. Plan South America (plansouthamerica.com) has a five-night luxury B&B stay at Loma del Angel, including a private guide and tours, from £2,605pp, B&B, with Gatwick flights.

FURTHER INFORMATION

UK citizens need a 30-day Tourist Card. These cost Virgin passengers £15 from Virgin Holidays at Gatwick (and Heathrow from June). The cheapest non-airline provider is cubaniatravel.com, selling them for £15 plus £5 postage. See insidecuba.co. ■