

The Destinations

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GETAWAY?

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WHAT'S YOUR WINTER GETAWAY?

Three Unforgettable Destinations

*Oysters in Charleston, South Carolina:
The Taste of a Place*

An Air of Havana

CUBA

By Claire Boobyer

The warm wind is up, slapping waves against the Malecón wall, a ripple of pillared concrete which separates Havana from the white-capped Atlantic. I open windy.com to check that the hurtling arrows on the app aren't flying towards Cuba. It's September; they could, but they don't. The sun glitters on the ocean swell and behind me, strikes the gold wrapping of what looks like the bow of a cruise ship, the brand new **SO/ Paseo del Prado La Habana** hotel. It appears like a colossal tribute to a vanished era as the cruise ship business from the US was cancelled in June thanks to 'Hurricane' Trump, as the Habaneros call him. He also made it harder for Americans to visit the tropical isle by other routes.

Now that the historic streets of Old Havana are free of umbrella-toting tour guides I tune into the rhythm of this 500-year-old city. Spanish colonial in foundation, her pretty portico mansions and whimsical churches were built by Castilian counts in imitation of their eminent aristocratic piles back home.

Plundered silver from South America was strapped to the decks of galleons in Havana harbor and

sailed back to the monarchs of Seville in Treasure Fleet convoys, fattening mainland coffers. Colonial immigrants cultivated sugar, coffee, and tobacco and worked thousands of captive African slaves on their land. Successive waves of ill-gotten profits are embodied in stone. While supremely handsome Antigua, Guatemala and Trinidad are time-trapped slumberous Spanish colonial cities by day, Havana in her elegant, if tatty, drapes, is a loud, honking, musical, dancing, gleeful sprite. Not for her the hushed-convent tones of Catholic legacy. This is a city of complete irreverence.

I wander past a chrome-festooned raspberry red Chevy rocking along the humid street; it squeezes past a wheel barrow stacked with glowing avocados the size of rugby balls. The handsome seller flirts with a 60-something friend in a clingy dress telling her how well she's looked after her figure.

For Cubans, flirting is as essential as breathing. We giggle, like we did in our 20s, at his bravura. Nearby a neon sign pops color into the blue sky. Artist Kadir López is restoring dozens of Havana's vintage neon bringing a seductive glow back to the city which once blinked more neon than New York. His new **Rex Neon Center** celebrates this heritage.

Further south we eye the colorful

street murals of the ex-brothel district of San Isidro where the sons of Cuba's most famous actor have opened art galleries, organize street parties, and plan a new restaurant and hotel. We call in at **Dador**, where elegant buttoned clothes crafted by young designers hang on long rails, a new venture made possible by Raul Castro's nine-year-old economic reforms.

We grab an almendrón - a shabby, almond-shaped American car which humps out west. We scale the vertiginous stairs of the boutique stay, **Malecón 663**. Here, young architects, with little chance to craft anew, indulge creative passions with each room celebrating a different vibe - from Afro-Cuban saints to 50s retro glamour. After a mojito on the roof terrace while a jazz quartet plays against the back drop of a descending tangerine orb, we almendrón it to the **Fábrica de Arte Cubano**. Rock musician X Alfonso gambled on a concept that has come to define contemporary Havana culture. The converted peanut oil factory heaves with Habaneros of all stripes and ages and the vibe is electric. It effortlessly hosts challenging photography, avant-garde dance, a score of musical events, a hint of thrilling possibilities, and a bloom of spirited chatter. Its cultural promise is something not even these current political times can extinguish.

THE BELLHOP

Traveler's Notebook:

Where to Stay

Malecón 663 Boutique Hotel

Sandra Exposito and her husband, Orlandito Mengual, have created a striking four room boutique hotel with true original Cubano flair. Choose the room that fits your style - retro eclectic, art deco, vintage 1950's, or contemporary. The hotel is perfectly located between the Historic Center and Modern Havana, in an early 20th century house that was renovated in 2016.

What we love:

- Relax at the roof terrace as you view the famous promenade Malecón or head to the hot tub for a relaxing dip.
- Start your day off with a continental or buffet breakfast before strolling to Old Square or Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta which are both less than 3 km away.
- Visit the artisan shops that sell soaps and jewelry before sitting down at the tapas bar on the ground floor.

BY
ESSENTIALIST

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Where to Shop

Dador

This new 2019 Old Havana store on Amargura is the brainchild of three Cuban women. They are producing a modern, high-quality clothing line all made in Cuba. Grab a cup of coffee from their kitchen as you shop for mix and match apparel in linen, cotton or rayon from flowy tropical shirts to nautical pants.



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Claire Boobyer is a Cubaholic who dances Cuban salsa, speaks fluent ‘Cuban’ and is honored to be called ‘half-Cuban’ by the hundreds of Cubans she’s met over the years. She writes regularly for the international press about Cuba. When she’s not wandering around under the palm trees of Cuba, she’s found digging up stories about other tropical communist corners, mainly Vietnam and Laos.



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