

# FORBIDDEN PLEASURES

AFTER DECADES AS A LAND LESS TRAVELED DUE TO POLITICAL ISSUES, CUBA IS EMERGING AS AN EXCITING TRAVEL DESTINATION.

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Growing up in the United States, Cuba was always forbidden fruit to me. Despite being located a mere 145 kilometers off the coast of Florida, and once a favored tropical playground for the affluent elite and US mafia from the 1920s to 1960s, a US embargo has prevented its citizens from traveling to the Caribbean isle for over 50 years.

For me, the fact that Cuba was off-limits added to its appeal. Like the thousands of other Americans who travel to Cuba every year, the threat of a fine wasn't enough to keep me away (there is good news that the US intends to normalize relations with Havana soon). All it took was a flight from Mexico City for me to find myself in Havana, the seaside city that had been shrouded in secrecy my entire life.

Havana is like no other capital city in the world. At first glance I felt like I had walked into a snapshot from the 1950s – classic Chevys and Buicks rumbled down the streets, elderly men sat in doorways and lazily puffed on enormous cigars, and the city's crumbling buildings were still remarkably beautiful.

In Havana most major hotels, such as the Hotel Nacional and the Habana Libre, are elaborate 5-star







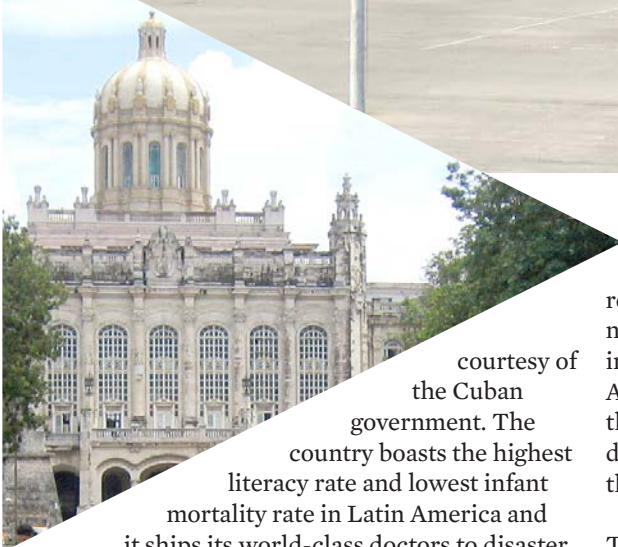
affairs. Instead, I opted to stay in one of the hundreds of guesthouses sprinkled around the city. “Casas particulares”, as they are called in Cuba, are a popular option for tourists. Similar to a bed and breakfast, guests stay in a room in a local family’s home.

Not only was it a comfortable and affordable option, but it offered a prime opportunity to catch a glimpse into the local way of life in this mysterious city. Like most things in Cuba, the room came with no frills, but the experience more than made up for the lack of luxury.

Meeting my Cuban host family was like being reunited with distant relatives. They welcomed me into their home, treated me like a member of the family, and eagerly answered my endless list of questions about life in this complex and beautiful country. We quickly bonded over the political differences of our respective countries.

Like an overly-doting mother, my hostess cooked a generous spread of traditional dishes each evening. The table was always piled with dishes such as *moros y cristianos* (black beans and rice), *ropa vieja* (shredded pork or beef), fried plantains and a medley of tropical fruits.

I spent a week in Havana and quickly learned that Cuba is a much more complex country than I’d imagined. It is a place where housing, education, healthcare and food are provided free of charge,



courtesy of the Cuban government. The country boasts the highest literacy rate and lowest infant mortality rate in Latin America and it ships its world-class doctors to disaster zones all over the world.

Yet, despite the government’s impressive achievements, the situation on the ground is far from perfect.

This is a country where doctors moonlight as taxi drivers in order to tack on some extra income to their US\$67 monthly salary. To receive government rations, residents stand in endless lines to obtain everyday goods such as rice, light bulbs and kerosene.

Instead of seeing homeless people begging for money on the streets, Cubans approached me asking for clothes, soap and other items in a country where commodities are hard to come by. While housing is provided to all citizens, the housing shortage means that entire extended families must live in extremely tight quarters.

### CITY OF CONTRASTS

Cubans constantly allude to these realities with the phrase “No es fácil” (It’s not easy). But much to my surprise, life in Havana seemed pretty good. Like most Americans, I was raised with the idea that a communist country would be gray, depressing, dystopian-esque. Havana was the complete opposite.

The energy is palpable and infectious. The city is alive with the sounds of impassioned singing. The pulsating beats of salsa and rumba music blares from discotheques and the melodic strumming of Spanish guitars echoes throughout the city. Families gather along the malecón (a Spanish-built seawall) sipping Havana Club rum, swaying their

hips to the music and thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Despite the restrictive rules and endless bureaucracy that impacts every facet of the Cuban way of life, there was an air of freedom in Havana that I hadn’t expected.

However, there are constant reminders of Cuba’s complex political situation and its even more





## CUBAN CHOICES

Here are several other picks of places outside Havana.

**Varadero:** Lounge on white sand beaches and frolic in azure waters of Cuba's premier beach town.

**Vinales:** Glimpse world-famous tobacco plantations and sample a Cohiba cigar.

**Santiago de Cuba:** Visit Cuba's other capital city for a dose of Afro-Caribbean culture and history.

**Baracoa:** Sample the city's delectable chocolate and isolated beaches.

**Trinidad:** Tour the UNESCO World Heritage Site, famed for its cobblestone streets and colorful colonial buildings.



complicated relationship with the US. It is impossible to forget that this island nation has been feuding with its powerful neighbor to the north for the better part of a century.

There are pieces of propaganda at every turn in Havana. Billboards and graffiti reading Viva Fidel (Long Live Fidel), Viva la Revolución (Long Live the Revolution) and Abajo Imperialismo (Down with Imperialism) decorate the city. The former US embassy, now the U.S. Special Interests Section, is surrounded by billboards advertising not-so-subtle criticisms of the US and its capitalistic ways.

While the majority of my stay was

spent wandering Havana's streets and getting to know my host family, I decided to spend my final day in the city touring the old town. Habana Veija, as it is known, is the city's historic center and tourist hub. Unlike most of Havana's decaying buildings, Habana Veija is impeccably cared for and its restored colonial buildings are all lathered in pristine coats of vibrant blues, reds and yellows.

I wandered the halls of the National Capitol Building, which looks suspiciously



similar to the domed Capitol building in Washington, D.C., yet another reminder of the dysfunctional relationship between the two countries. Before the revolution, the building housed the country's government and is now home to the Academy of Sciences. I sat on the capitol's steps and watched street vendors hawk aguardiente (a potent alcohol), ham sandwiches and small pizzas topped with pungent cheese to tourists and Cubans alike.

For my final stop of the day I ducked into Bodeguita del Medio, a bar made famous by American writer Ernest Hemingway who once frequented the establishment. I ordered a mojito, the cocktail made from rum, mint leaves and sugar, for which the bar is famous for, sat down and listened to a guitar player skillfully strum his instrument.

It was the perfect ending to an endlessly fascinating visit to Havana. 🇨🇺

