





With its antique cars and sun-splashed colonial buildings, Cuba is ripe for street photography. **Claire Boobyer** signed up for a class with a fast-shooting local pro

Pictures Claire Boobyer & Julio Muñoz

# CAPTURING CUBA

**Historic streets**

Unesco-listed Trinidad centres on the 18th century Convento de San Francisco

“Dress like a tourist, and come with no bags and absolutely no photographic vests,” Julio instructed.

“But what if I need to change lenses?” I replied.

“There’ll be no changing of lenses,” came his resolute response. “You’ll bring one camera with one lens. The idea of street photography is to work quickly and unseen, like a ghost. If you’re fiddling with lenses you’ll lose the moment, and if you come wearing vests you’ll make people nervous.”

“The idea of street photography is to work quickly and unseen, like a ghost”

So, my idea of stalking the streets of Trinidad, Cuba, armed with an arsenal of high-end photographic equipment was completely turned on its head.

I was being asked to turn invisible – difficult, with my pale skin and strawberry-blonde hair in this land of copper-skinned locals. But I donned a shapeless shirt and shorts to ensure the Cuban *piropos* (flirtatious remarks) were kept to a minimum and I didn’t become a centre of attention while clicking around town.

**STREET SMARTS**

I’d signed up to Julio Muñoz’s street photography boot camp, along with rookie snappers Henning and Madeleine from Norway. Julio is an electrical engineer turned photographer, who has worked with some of the best street photographers in their field: Magnum photographer David Alan Harvey and British photographer Keith Cardwell among them. Like many Cubans born after the 1959 revolution, Julio has reinvented himself each time economic

Titanics have threatened to sink the island since the 1980s. He now works with professional photographers and filmmakers as well as visitors hoping to acquire snapping skills.

Our workshop in street photography began in school. Julio’s classroom is his mansion: built in 1800, and furnished in Spanish colonial grandeur and original, rose-tinted tiles, it straddles a prominent street corner in the centre of Trinidad, a Unesco World Heritage site.

“With street photography, you must take control of your camera,” Julio informed us, “because, unlike landscape and still-life, the photographer doesn’t control the environment they’re in. If you let the camera dictate for you, you will lose time.”

It became Julio’s mantra: time is of the essence. The black box with its beeps, bumps, lumps, lamps, side doors, glass curtain and carousel of wheels is a curious beast, and Julio tasked us with breathing life into the inanimate metal package.

**IN THE FRAME****Back-button focusing**

By default, with DSLRs you autofocus and take a picture with the same button – half-press to focus, fully press to snap. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

By reassigning your autofocus function to a button on the back of the camera (usually assigned to AE Lock by default) you can focus faster, avoid the touch-and-go nature of half-pressing a button, and free up your shutter-release button to simply take pictures. Check your user manual or Google ‘back-button DSLR focus’ for online tutorials on switching your DSLR over.



**Inside & out**  
Julio's horse inspects a distant relative in his casa; a low sun lights a classic Cuban scene near the Plaza Major



**Perfect portraits**  
For relaxed portraits, sneak a photo and see how your subject reacts (right); to tell a story, catch your subject in the midst of an activity (left)



#### Keep it simple

The strongest compositions fill the frame with what's relevant – and cut out everything else

## /// Your right arm should work like a tripod. Imagine you're shooting with a rifle ///

“Reading the camera manual will make you depressed,” he joked, referring to the glut of function instructions in a camera’s bible. Julio simplified the job for us by sketching on paper the fundamentals: the relationship between letting enough light into the camera (aperture) and the speed of the shutter to capture the image.

For the best in street photography, he said, we needed a wide-angled lens to create a greater depth of field, so that more of the scene would be in focus to create more of a sense of reality.

Next, from grappling with camera control we moved on to how to capture a winning shot. “The best compositions are the simplest,” Julio explained. “The picture

should deliver a message very quickly, so it should only include elements that are useful for that message. To achieve that, change perspective when shooting and think about two rules: linking, and capturing the right moment.”

Nothing was lost in translation as Julio held up a typical Cuba example. It showed a musician playing his instrument (a visual link to his profession) in an active motion (right moment). Cropping out the instrument, or snapping a drum player with hands at rest, wouldn’t see us picking up any prizes.

Before heading out on to the streets, we fixed our cameras’ sensitivity at ISO100 to get the best possible results in Cuba’s

strong sunlight. As we’d be on the move, and picture opportunities – like American classic cars and horses – would be moving towards us, Julio advised us to set our cameras to shutter priority mode, with a minimum exposure of 100/sec. This meant the aperture would be compromised, but it was more important that the pictures were not blurred. Julio also suggested we tailor our camera controls, reassigning the autofocus control from the shutter release button to a button on the back of the camera (AE lock, by default), allowing us to take pictures more quickly (*see box, p28*).

Lastly, Julio showed us how to hold the camera body before we stepped out into the glorious tropical light.

“Your right arm should work like a tripod. Imagine you are shooting with a rifle; it should be the stabiliser.”

#### SHOOT FAST, ASK LATER

Cuba is a gift to photographers. Trinidad, in particular, is a beautiful, sun-baked town of low-slung, ochre-washed colonial homes that slumbers between mountains and the



Caribbean Sea. Life here is lived on the streets and in the large open windows and doors: horses and carts clip-clop across ballast stone streets; children kick decrepit and deflated footballs along the stones; mothers and toddlers peer out from behind window grilles as they sit on street-level sills; old men, cigars perched in sun-creased mouths, slouch on steps in a slither of shade, smoking their cares away.

“The secret to good street photography is to work more quickly,” Julio emphasised.

But, we protested, wouldn't we need to ask permission to take photos of people, which would slow us down?

But our class wasn't over: apparently we had to graduate not just in camera-work but psychology too. And Julio had some controversial ideas on that front.

“If you ask, you lose the moment,” he said. “My advice is to sneak a photo first. If the person looks OK, then continue; if you sense they're not happy, engage in conversation. Or work with a second person. Cubans love to talk. The first photographer can relax the person by speaking to them while the second shoots.”

I was beginning to feel overwhelmed trying to absorb all the practical, psychological and technical info. But there was more. While out and about we'd need to predict what was going to happen in order to move into place for the perfect picture, and identify main characters who would enhance our compositions.

In Trinidad's stunning Plaza Mayor, a

## IN THE KNOW

### Visiting Trinidad



#### Where is it?

A five-hour drive south-east of Havana, close to the southern coast.

#### When to go:

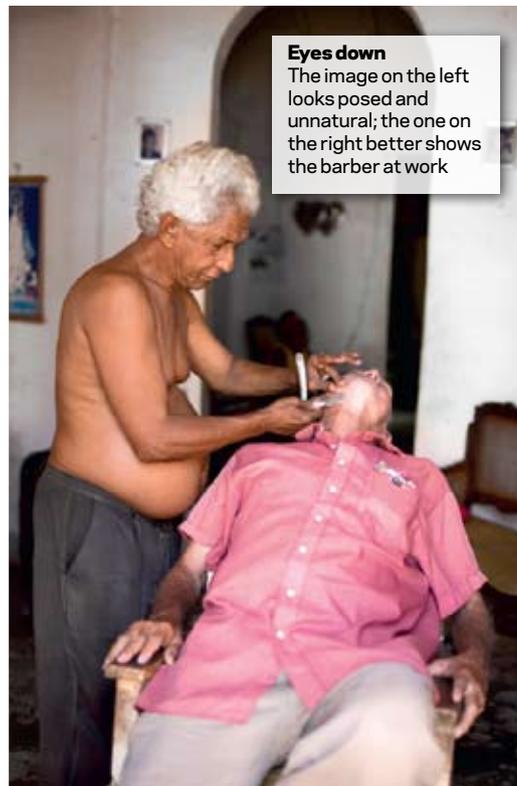
Year-round

sunshine almost guarantees great picture conditions; the best light is 7am-10am and 4pm-dusk. Hurricanes are most likely June-November. The Easter processions are fascinating and a photographic challenge. See Julio's Trinidad events calendar to tailor your trip: [www.trinidadphoto.com](http://www.trinidadphoto.com).

**Don't miss:** The Plaza Mayor is dominated by the honey-hued Iglesia de la Santísima Trinidad and the handsome Palacio Brunet (Museo Romántico), embellished with period antiques. Just off centre is the Museo Histórico Municipal, the glorious former home of a sugar baron. The iconic yellow tower, the former Convento de San Francisco de Asis, is now a museum dedicated to the fight against counter-revolutionaries - those who challenged Fidel's regime in the 1960s.

**Getting there:** Fly UK-Havana with Virgin (about nine hours; [www.virgin-atlantic.com](http://www.virgin-atlantic.com)). To get to Trinidad, hire a car or take a Viazul tourist bus ([www.viazul.com](http://www.viazul.com)) or a Cubanacán Conectando Cuba coach.

**Further info:** For resources and articles, visit [www.wanderlust.co.uk/planatrip](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/planatrip)



#### Eyes down

The image on the left looks posed and unnatural; the one on the right better shows the barber at work

lumbering 1950s American car trundled by. It was about to motor past a sun-lit colonial building. We were all fumbling with our settings and missed it, but Julio had hopped over the ankle-cranking cobbles to capture the antique beast set against the mansion backdrop. He'd predicted the perfect position of the car and set his focus on a large stone so that when the car reached the spot of ideal composition, the shot was ready.

Embarrassed, we wandered away from the centre into the barrio of Tres Cruces, looking for subjects that moved even more slowly than old American *máquinas*.

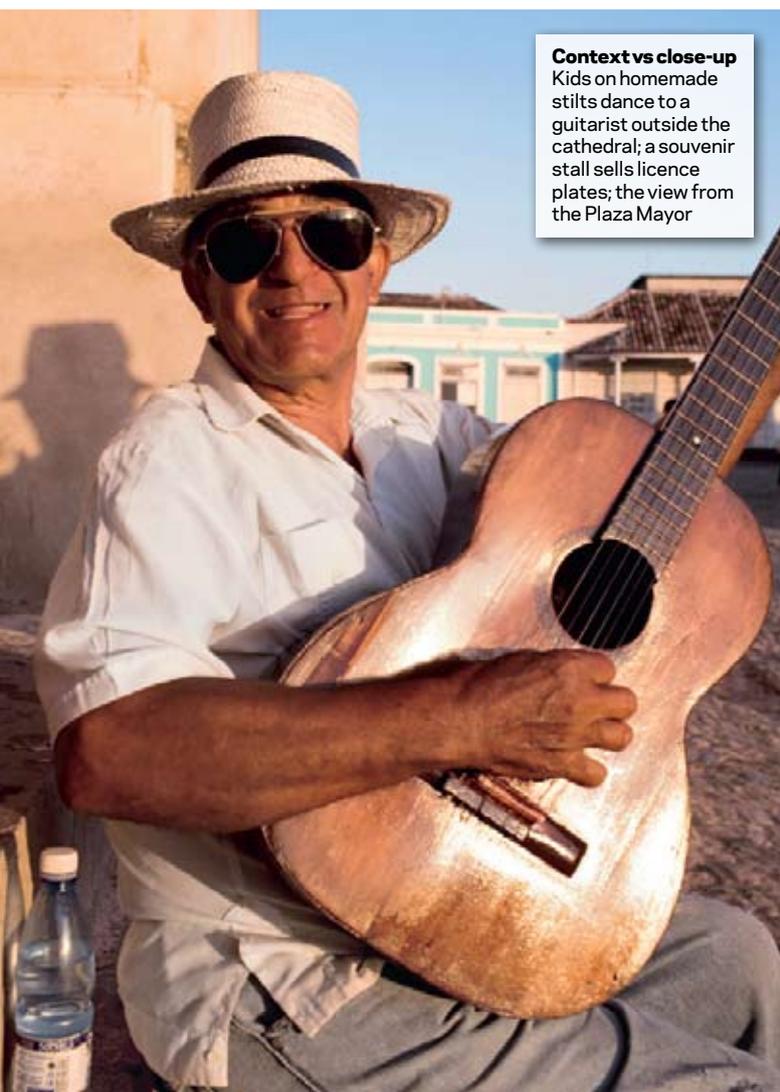
Men lounged on horses on a street corner. “Shoot as near to the subject as you can,” Julio directed. “Don't delay as you will make people nervous and lose the moment.”

As we snapped the cowboys, whole chunks of sky opened up in the frame.

“Avoid empty spaces in your composition,” Julio commanded. “I know you can fix it in the computer later but that means you are a computer person and not



**Context vs close-up**  
 Kids on homemade stilts dance to a guitarist outside the cathedral; a souvenir stall sells licence plates; the view from the Plaza Mayor



IN THE BAG



## What equipment do I need?

For effective street photography you need a camera with an optical viewfinder (ie you're holding the camera up to your eye, not looking at the LCD screen) and a fast, wide lens. A **DSLR** is ideal - an entry-level model is fine - though a **high-end compact** with viewfinder and manual controls (such as the Canon G12 or Nikon P7000) would work too.

**Fixed lenses** are faster than zooms, and force you to get into the action rather than hang back:

a fixed 28mm, 35mm or (just about) 50mm allow you to capture whole scenes, sharply, in limited light. Alternatively, bring a zoom lens that starts with a wide angle, such as a 24-70mm f2.8.

Bring a stack of **memory cards** and **lens cloth**. A **lens hood** will protect the lens.

The author used a Canon 5D Mark 1 with a fixed 35mm f1.4 lens. A few shots were taken with a 28-135mm f3.5-5.6 lens, a good general-purpose travel photography lens.

a photographer. It's important to take good pictures first."

We edged closer.

"Claire, move around the subject," Julio barked. "You are not moving around. Move around the subject. You have a fixed lens. You are the zoom moving in and around the subject."

I wondered if Julio had aspirations to be a movie director. He was not the least bit impatient but he wasn't slow to point out our faults as we snapped a gravel worker. He, like most of the Cuban population, has never located the word 'modest' in the dictionary.

"Well, you all missed the dog. The dog was there several times next to the man and you missed the opportunity. You can learn from the master," he said, demonstrating his craft by taking a perfectly composed shot complete with worker, spade and lactating Dalmatian.

Next, we pinballed across town to witness a postcard-perfect group of old men with wonderful sun-crinkled faces tinkling out traditional Cuban tunes. We practised the art of shyness-avoidance and got right up close in an attempt to snap some 'right

moment/right linking' portraits.

Next, we practised some artistic nosiness.

The colonial homes of Trinidad all have fulsome, street-level rectangular bay windows loosely barred with iron grilles. The wooden shutters are always open in the day, and the pregnant bulge of the windows invites passers-by to peer in.

This was how I came across a shirtless barber shaving a client in his front room. Julio said I was hunting: I propped my camera on the grille and waited until I got the right shot.

### MARKS FOR EFFORT

Back at the mansion, it was time for the "laughs", as Julio called the crit session.

First up were the barber shots.

"Unless the shot shows the barber with an instrument, as you eventually captured, that man could have been killing, slapping or massaging that man. There was no link. Also when the barber was looking at you, you were not a ghost, so that one was not the right shot either."

Reviewing my pictures of a home that practised the Afro-Cuban religion of Palo Monte, Julio advised: "When you have a

mess of things, crop your mind for the picture to make sense. The three saucepans have no meaning; the one saucepan cooking the blonde hair is powerful."

As the images spooled across the computer screen, Julio delivered his unflinching verdicts: Henning must get closer to his subjects and take more horizontal shots. Madeleine was chided for shooting people's backs.

"All of you need to move; don't be lazy. Move the camera up and down; predict, prepare and shoot," came the final judgement from the film director-in-the-making.

The next day, I enrolled in a salsa class. Carlos, my teacher, encouraged me to relax with a few shots of Havana Club rum. By the time I'd finished the class of multiple turns, my limbs were lubricated and my confidence had surged. Camera in hand, and with a jaunty walk, I launched myself into the street getting right up close to subjects.

At last - I'd found the extra secret ingredient to a successful street photography outing: a few drops of the bronze nectar that is aged Cuban rum. ■



## THE TRIP

Photography Workshops with Julio Muñoz cost CUC\$25 per session. Sessions include: camera usage and parameters; composition; street photography in action. The post-practical review session is free of charge. Workshops can be booked online ([www.trinidadphoto.com](http://www.trinidadphoto.com)); walk-in bookings are also available.

Snappers can also stay in Julio's house, in the centre of Trinidad, giving them the opportunity to photograph a lovely colonial-era home at leisure too. A stay at his *casa particular* starts from CUC\$30 (£18.50) for a double room; breakfast costs CUC\$5 (£3). See [www.casa.trinidadphoto.com](http://www.casa.trinidadphoto.com).

*/// Don't be lazy. Move the camera up and down; predict, prepare and shoot ///*