

Autumn & Winter bring a Cuban cocktail of choices

BY CLAIRE BOOBBYER

Cuba sizzles year-round but the thermometer drops a notch over autumn and winter, allowing for more energetic kinds of fun. Whether that's in the cities, in the mountains or in the sea, Cuba still offers more flavour, beauty and excitement than you would dare hope to experience on one holiday.

Cuba's greatest export is its music and there's nowhere more sultry and sexy to experience the rhythms than in the capital, Havana. Salsa dancing to the percussive sounds of Cuban tunes under wafting ceiling fans with a mojito waiting at the bar is a rite of passage. There's steady footwork as well as fancy footwork, too: runners can complete the November Marabana, a half-marathon where the course trails past iconic city sights.

For those enjoying the slow lane, a cigar tour of the Fábrica de Tabaco Partagás, followed by a trip down gangster-memory lane to the Hotel Nacional and Hotel Riviera, bolt holes of Meyer Lansky and his crew, will paint a picture of pre-1959 Havana.

Escape from the city buzz by heading to the white-sand beaches of Cuba's Caribbean coast.

Swim with dolphins near Guardalavaca, cruise on a catamaran out to the exotic wildlife reserve of Cayo Saetía, search for flamingos at Playa Santa Lucía or take to the skies for a flight above the Varadero peninsula.

Fantasing about your inner Ernest Hemingway? Hemingway caught marlin and swordfish off Cayo Guillermo in the 1930s and '40s, and Cuba's most beautiful beach, Playa Pilar, at Guillermo's western end, is named after the writer's fishing boat.

Anglers' widows can relax at the Acuavida Centro Spa-Talaso on nearby Cayo Coco, while divers should explore the marine life of the southern coastal waters: around Isla de la Juventud, María La Gorda, the Bay of Pigs and



the shipwreck of the 1898 Spanish armored cruiser, Cristóbal Colón, near Santiago de Cuba.

Natural encounters are some of the highlights of this tropical isle: exploring cave systems; bird-watching along the trails around the eco-community of Las Terrazas followed by immersion in the natural river pools at San Juan; hiking to waterfalls in the Topes de Collantes; climbing to Fidel Castro's HQ during the 1950s rebel campaign in the Sierra Maestra; and swimming in the River of Honey in Cuba's eastern pocket of paradise, Baracoa.

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