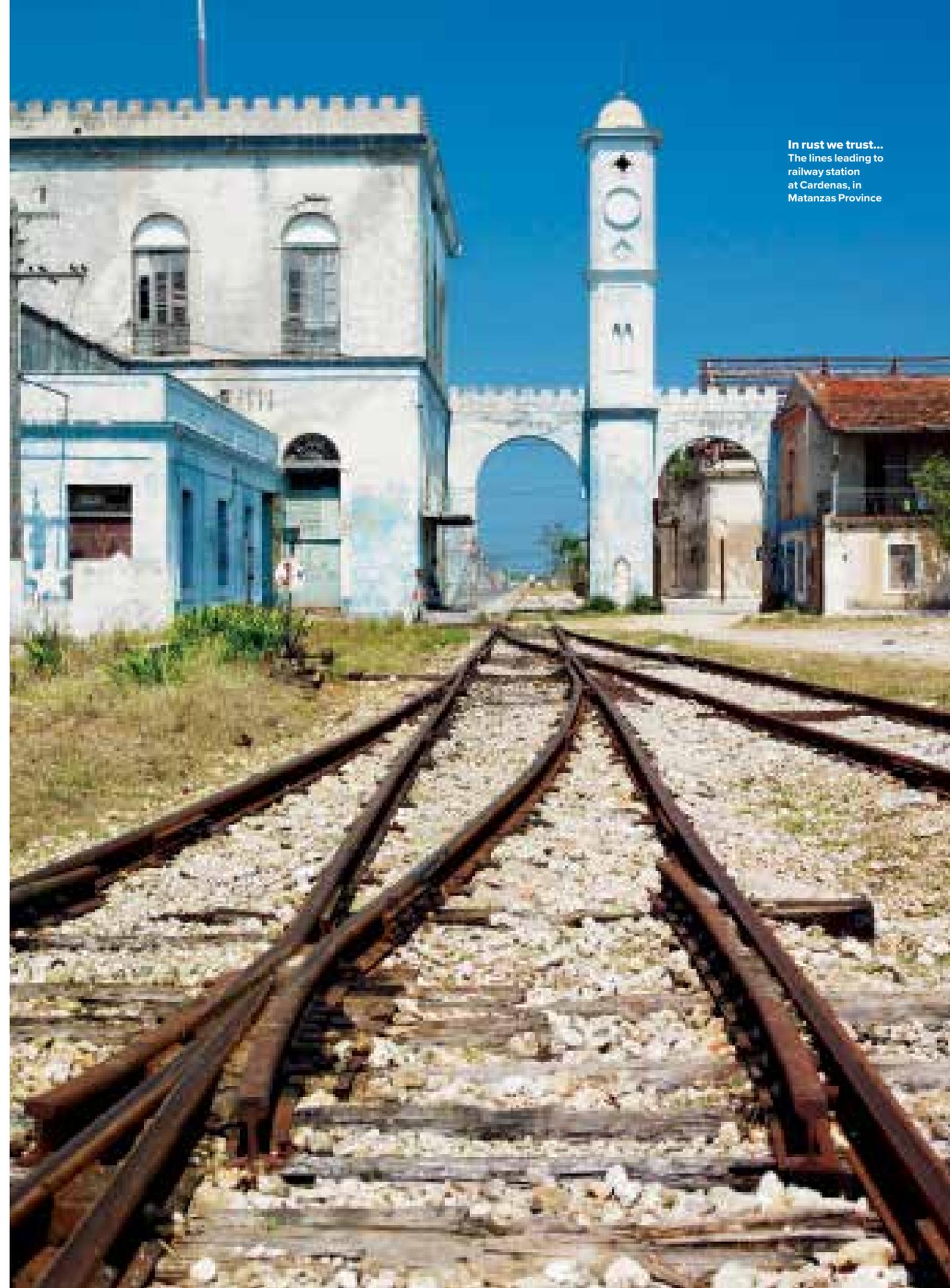


# OFF THE BEATEN TRACKS: CUBA

Aren't Cuban railways a bit of a joke? Not so. Explore bits of the island that tourists rarely see by taking the slow train from the north to the south. A good sense of humour may be required...

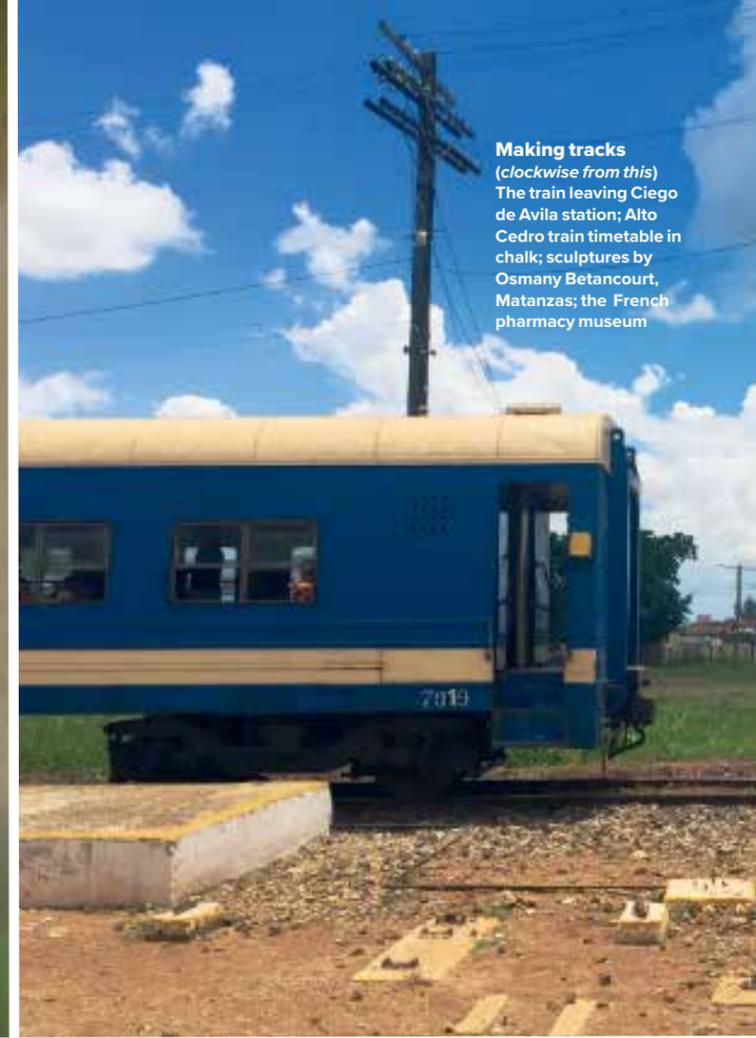
WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **CLAIRE BOOBYER**



In rust we trust...  
The lines leading to  
railway station  
at Cardenas, in  
Matanzas Province



**Small pharma**  
The old French colonial pharmacy was founded in 1882



**Making tracks**  
(clockwise from this)  
The train leaving Ciego de Avila station; Alto Cedro train timetable in chalk; sculptures by Osmany Betancourt, Matanzas; the French pharmacy museum

**“Y**ou’re travelling by train?” the stationmaster at Cárdenas quizzed, eyeing me suspiciously. “Yes, I’d like to... if there are any,” I bumbled. I was steered into a tiny office through a darkened waiting

room with a bench lit only by the light of a radiant half-moon stained glass window. I was sure the Cárdenas waiting room hadn’t seen a passenger since 1940. Paper timetables were whisked out of a drawer, the station custodian was summoned, and it was agreed there was a departure at 6am the next morning, taking me from this former sugar-boom-town stop on Cuba’s northern coastline – just east of Havana – down to rural Jovellanos, 30 kilometres south.

Telling Cubans I was taking the train was always met with a raised eyebrow followed by a joke. For the last 17 years that I’ve been travelling in Cuba, I had heard, with little variation, that the train leaving Havana on a Monday arrived in Santiago de Cuba on a Wednesday – a journey scheduled to take 16 hours. Meanwhile, the guidebooks give hysterical warnings about the trains, the toilets, the fictional timetables. As such, the last time I had caught the mainline train in Cuba was the year 2000, for an uncomfortable ride with nothing to eat.

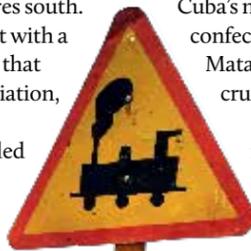
But while the Cuban network had puffed its way to a near-mythical status of dubious operation, Cubans *do* still take the train, the Russians are investing, and Havana’s grand central station is getting a facelift. And so, 175 years since the first rail network was finished in Cuba, I found myself boarding the train

again, taking me from Havana in the north-west all the way to Santiago de Cuba on the south-east coast. This main railway line passes directly down the centre of the island weaving through small towns and large cities, laying a track that most visitors don’t ride. I would be visiting Cuba anew and would meet locals who live far from those tourist hot spots. I was certainly hoping it’d all take a lot longer than 16 hours.

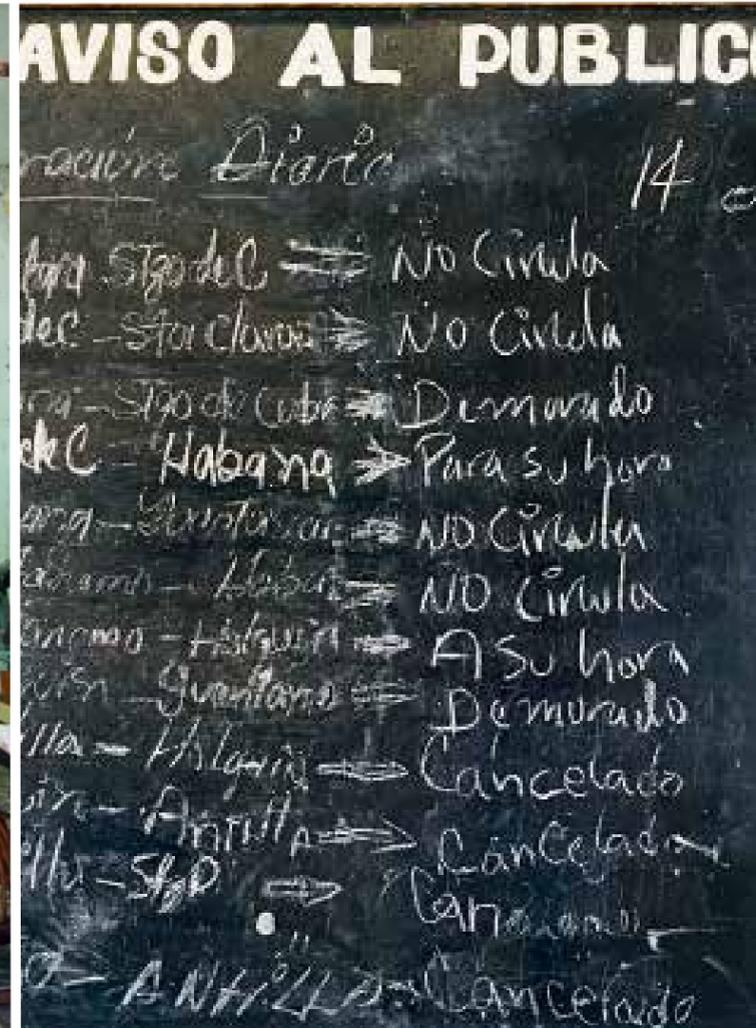
**Sugar is not always sweet**

I confess, the beginning of my journey lived down to the railway’s reputation. The Hershey Electric Railway, which jolts from Havana to the port city of Matanzas, 90km east, wasn’t running due to a broken bridge. When running, this tiny commuter train tilts through farmland, tree-shaded hamlets, and makes 46 stops along Cuba’s northern coast including Hershey, a town built by chocolate confectioner Milton S Hershey in 1916, before crawling on to Matanzas in a four-hour trip. Instead, I had to settle for a few crushed public bus rides and a taxi.

The wave of tourism that’s loomed in the wake of the improvement in Cuban-American relations – numbers have jumped from three to four million – has not reached Matanzas. This meant that I explored the pills and bottles of the world’s only preserved 19th-century French pharmacy all by myself. From there, I admired the delicate handmade books at the Ediciones Vigía publishing house, the startling collection of African masks in the Lolo Galeria-Taller art museum, the crumpled sculptures of human heads by artist Osmany Betancourt, and met the collective El Almacén, who are recording indy Afro-Cuban folk musicians whose music is rarely heard. ▶



Previous Page: Amy; This page: Dreamstime





**Getting festive**  
(clockwise from this)  
Rehearsing a musical  
parade in Jovellanos;  
Luis Correa making  
mojitos at Finca Luna;  
Villa Yoya 1901, Mayari



◀ Trains from Havana pull in at Matanzas and continue east down the mainline. I had planned to take the local daily Train 117 down the mainline at 4:40pm to get me to Jovellanos in time for afternoon coffee, but the lure of getting there by the Cárdenas branch line instead tugged at the explorer in me. When the island was the world's biggest producer of sugar, this region pumped out more than half the island's output in 1846, and the railways were built to get the crystals to port. In 1837, tiny Cuba became the seventh country in the world to build a train line (the first in Latin America to do so). In 1838, the second Cuban line was laid between Cárdenas and Jovellanos.

I arrived at Cárdenas station just before dawn as I'd been advised by the stationmaster to get the fabled 6am train. Its Moorish clocktower loomed large out of the darkness, over the blue castellated building with mustard trim around its arched windows. The railway signals and track snapped into focus while a cloak of cobalt blue rose over the horizon. However, nothing would be chugging over it today.

When I learnt the 6am had been cancelled, the same stationmaster just shrugged. Disappointed, I searched out *camiones* (small buses or converted cattle trucks) which transport Cubans all over the island, and which, in the early hours, were already rattling down main street, heading to Jovellanos. After 45 minutes passing royal palms, sugar cane and industrial carnage – the industrial carcasses of mills that have long-since shredded their last batch of sugar cane – I was sipping hot, sweet Cuban coffee at Finca Luna, as the sun warmed up the day.

## 'This tiny commuter train tilts through farmland, tree-shaded hamlets, and makes 46 stops along Cuba's northern coast'

Potters Luis and Nancy Correa run this plant-packed farm on the edge of Jovellanos, and they have rooms for guests. Most visitors devour the organic food, throw a few pots and swim in the pool, but I was keen to explore the workaday colonial town where few foreigners tread. Luis introduced me to town historian María Cristina Sotomayor Guma who told me that Jovellanos once hosted 44 sugar mills powered by slaves from Benin, with some 800,000 brought to Cuba from West Africa during the slave trade era. As we passed the main square, an impromptu carnival parade danced past us, a practice for part of the folkloric gatherings that take place every 31 August and 31 December. As I took in all the swivelling hips, thudding drums and thwacking of iron, the ongoing cultural impact of that brutal industry seemed for a moment to look perhaps a little brighter.

### Living off the land

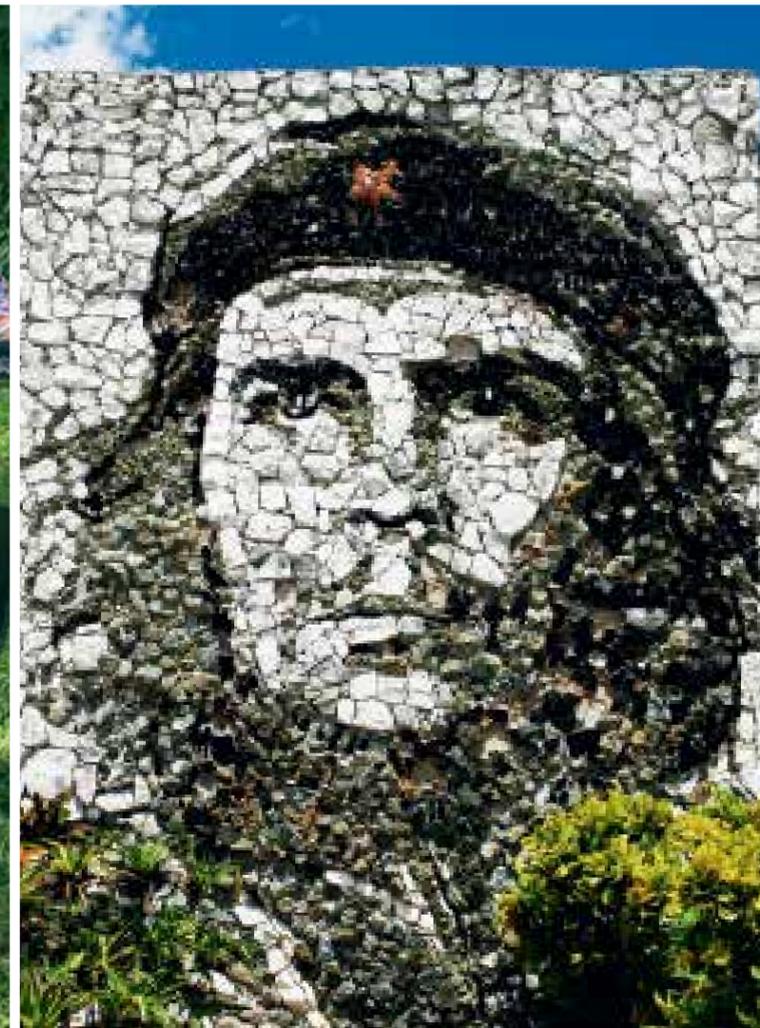
Back at the finca, Luis fashioned a mojito using homegrown *hierba buena* (Cuban mint) and gave me a tour of the farm, a trash yard he converted into a 30,000 sq km plot 24 years ago and where he now grows mango, coconut, cashew and coffee. I was reluctant to leave Finca Luna's fresh air and friendly embrace, but it was time to board a departing train. Maira, Nancy's sister, waved me goodbye with sandwiches and a joke: "So you take your fruit, your milk, and your ice, and at the end of the journey, you can drink your milkshake!" ▶

**Motoring over Matanzas**  
A classic car rolls over the bridge overlooking Versailles district





Sights in a sidecar (clockwise from this) Finca Las Manacas, Birán – Fidel Castro's birthplace; Che Guevara mural, Matanzas; riding the '63 Ural to Birán; the train pulls in to Alto Cedro



◀ She laughed, referring to the bumping clatter of Cuban carriages.

Spartan Jovellanos station, uninterested in my foreign passport which usually warrants a more expensive fare, sold me a ticket for 8CUP (about 20p) to my next stop, Zaza del Medio in Cuba's green central province of Sancti Spiritus. Jovellanos passengers are allotted their own carriage and I shared it with just a handful of locals, one of whom handed me her three-month-old baby while she went to the loo. The dawn brought window views of regal royal palms, egrets and oxen ploughing fields.

I was hoping to hail a classic vintage car to my next destination, an organic farm recently opened to overnight stays. But for the morning arrival at Zaza, there was only a horse and cart waiting. We trotted out of town into the fields of Sancti Spiritus and up a track to Finca del Medio, a fertile farm of palms, mango and mamey where I was greeted with warm milk fresh from the udder, orange wine (aged three years), and a morning feast of coconut pancake, guava jam, mamey milkshake, and passion fruit juice. Family life revolved around the creeper-draped buildings, housing the kitchen and bedrooms, giving the place a Hobbiton feel. I spent the next three days gorging on some of the best food I've tasted in Cuba in between touring the farm, learning about biogas and helping in the kitchen.

In a country which struggles to feed itself (80% of Cuba's food is imported), this farm is an inspiration. It's self-sufficient with mango, rice and "enough yucca forever". It cultivates bees for honey, makes

## 'I listened to the howl as this ancient beast sped through a cloudless night, under the waning moon, with the whiff of oil and iron'

daily cheese, sells surplus milk, has its own reservoir, and reserves calcine cow bones for the kitchen.

Owner José Casimiro told me he started raising chickens and pigs during the 'Special Period', the euphemism for when US\$6 billion of subsidies were axed by Russia in the early 90s after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"We became a centre of egg production. People travelled 100 kilometres; there were no eggs in Cuba

at that time. I was also selling cheese to a pizza guy in Havana." The pizza maker offered him double the price to keep the supply going – Casimiro was earning a small fortune back then when Cuba's economy was tanking. The country's relationship with food is complicated (and political), but there's a growing movement of thinkers and doers on the island capitalising on the organic revolution who believe that there's a more abundant way forward. Just some of these places are open to receiving visitors at the moment — like Finca Luna and Finca del Medio — but many are still enticingly off the radar.

### Seats, smells & sweat

"The train is awful, uncomfortable, there are no comfortable seats," said the ticket seller, "it's in a bad way and it smells." After doing what many Cubans do – hitching – I went by road to get to the mainline station at Ciego de Avila, but I had to contain my giggles after asking the ticket seller about the next departure east. "So, how can I buy a ticket?" I asked. ▶

◀ “You can’t. You have to buy one on board.”

As the train didn’t leave until the early hours I negotiated a half night with a B&B. When I told the owner I was leaving her home after midnight for the train, she mocked: “You’re a little mad, but I guess none of us is completely sane!”

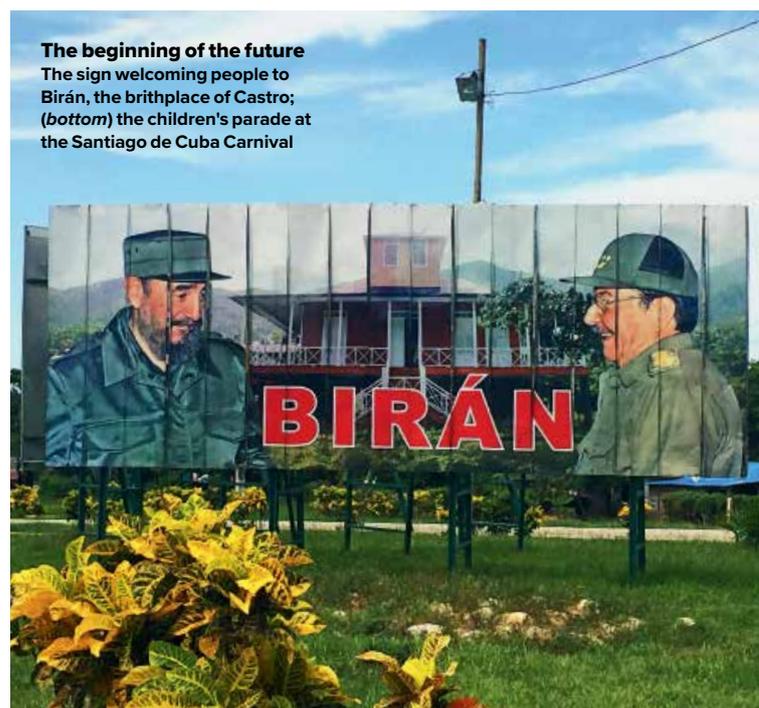
A horse-drawn carriage delivered me to the station in time. The train, however, was 45 minutes late. There were no seats available on board so I perched on the train hostess’ seat and watched military men, and hostesses patrolling the carriages. Dressed in a navy and cream trilby, one of their male colleagues approached, telling me that he’d lose his job if he sold me a ticket. Perplexed, I sat on the floor, Jeremy Corbyn style, and listened to the howl and the roll as this ancient beast sped through a cloudless night under the waning moon with the whiff of oil and iron, followed by the light leaking into the day, royal palms already at attention. At Camagüey, I bagged a plump red reclining seat and some sleep. When I woke, my Cuban neighbour explained that the train was full of military families on holiday, hence perhaps the reluctance to sell me a ticket.

I didn’t have to worry about breakfast. Sellers with shopping trolleys piled with peanuts, popcorn, biscuits, sandwiches, and drinks ploughed the carriages. At Cacocúm, the engine collapsed forcing a three-hour stationary sweat fest (Cuban trains ceased air-conditioning years ago). My new Cuban friends snapped up the “pizzas a 5 pesos” while I told them I thought I was going to lose my teeth after buying some sweets. We bonded over the sticky situation and they made sure I was fed and watered while we were stuck.

## End of the line

When the train finally pulled into Alto Cedro, my B&B host Hector, greeted me in a restored classic car. We drove to nearby Birán, the farmstead birthplace of Cuban Revolution leader Fidel Castro where I toured the site, now a museum (CUC\$10), and learnt more about the man who ruled Cuba for decades. El Comandante’s official narrative is usually strictly controlled and observed, but here at Birán, the story is about a young Fidel, his brother Raúl and their family; it’s framed with more personal insight. It’s the only place in Cuba where you can examine so many rarely seen portraits of the Castro clan.

Hector’s Villa Yoya 1901, in Mayarí, was perfect for R&R in the warm embrace of his family. Mayarí is an untouristy town well



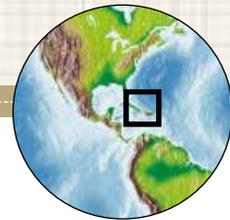
**The beginning of the future**  
The sign welcoming people to Birán, the birthplace of Castro; (bottom) the children’s parade at the Santiago de Cuba Carnival

## ‘Santiago was gearing up for carnival when I arrived, with colourful, costumed parades of dancing children, and brightly decked floats’

located for visits to Birán and the tropical beaches, plunging waterfalls, and pine forest located nearby. However, I was keen to reach Santiago – 868 kilometres from Havana – and the final stop at the end of my rail journey, so pushed on. Hector drove me to Alto Cedro station in the sidecar of his 1963 Ural, just in time for the delayed arrival of the 08:30. Unfortunately, the train had broken down somewhere in the wilds of eastern Cuba. I wondered out loud if I’d make Santiago by nightfall. Cubans are world renowned for ‘resolving’ things and I felt cared for in a way that I don’t think any other train service in the world would manage. The control tower master descended and advised me to board the delayed train to Guantánamo at 16:30, alight at Pastorita, and walk 10 minutes through the town – following other passengers doing the same – to the nearby station at San Luis, and catch the last bus to Santiago. When the train pulled in, the guard escorted me to it, lifted my luggage, and barked at the staff to point out my stop. World-class customer service for a ride that cost me about 5 pence.

Santiago was gearing up for carnival when I arrived, with colourful, costumed parades of dancing children, and brightly decked floats. All that money I’d saved on the train journey, and all that healthy eating went by the wayside, as I bought mugs of local ale on the street and tucked into one of Cuba’s greatest culinary highlights: spit-roasted pork dressed with juicy chunks of crackling. I also became aware of being surrounded by foreign faces imbibing the carnival atmosphere. I realised I hadn’t seen a tourist in nearly two weeks, save for two Puerto Ricans at Finca del Medio. So much for over-tourism.

Certainly, when you board a Cuban train, you need to forget about things like digitisation, consistent information, logical ticket purchase, and timetables that function like clockwork. But arm yourself with patience, a bit of prior homework, some basic maths, journey wriggle-room, and – most importantly – a sense of humour, and the rails will take you off the beaten track. Cuba’s trains may still be worthy of a good joke or two, but that wasn’t why I had a smile on my face. **W**



# Cuba Footnotes

## VITAL STATISTICS

**Capital:** Havana  
**Population:** 11.5 million  
**Language(s):** Spanish  
**Time:** GMT - 5 (summer GMT - 4)  
**International dialling code:** +53  
**Visas:** UK nationals need a tourist card, valid for 30 days. Virgin Atlantic sells them for £15 from Gatwick. The cheapest online provider is <http://www.cubavisas.com>. The Cuba Consulate charges £39: <http://misiones.minrex.gob.cu/en/united-kingdom/>  
**Money:** Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC), around £0.74 to UK£. Cuban Peso (CUP), around 25 CUP to CUC\$1 (or 30p). USD are accepted by airport taxis at USD\$0.87 to the CUC. Lines for airport exchange bureaux can be soul destroying.

### When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **High season & dry season.** A light sweater is often needed in the Dec-Jan evenings in (27-31°C). May is the green season before the rains arrive.  
 ■ **Hurricane season.** Temperatures begin to rise in June, and the heat and humidity in July and August can be insufferable (30-33°C). Downpours are heavy but dry up quickly. The heat begin to subside in late September to 31-32°C.

**Health & safety**  
 Standard vaccinations are required; take insect repellent and medical insurance is compulsory.

### Further reading & information

The **SpanishDict** and **Galileo Map** apps work off-line and are indispensable [free]. **EasyGuide to Cuba** (Frommer's, 2015) by the author is a good guide.  
**LATA.com** – the Latin America Travel Association.

**More online**  
 Visit [www.wanderlust.co.uk/184](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/184) for links to more content

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  - ◆ Cuba: a new revolution – issue 159
  - ◆ Following in Che Guevara's footsteps through South America – issue 181
- PLANNING GUIDES**
- ◆ Cuba travel guide

## THE TRIP

### Getting there

The author's flights were provided by **Cuba Holidays** (020 7644 1770, [cubaholidays.co.uk](http://cubaholidays.co.uk)), who offer tailor-made holidays to Cuba including flights, accommodation and transfers from just £1,099pp. Other airlines operate from European hubs). **Virgin Atlantic** (0344 520 0012; [virginatlantic.com](http://virginatlantic.com)) flies direct from LGW to Havana (From £489 return; 8.5-10 hrs). Other airlines fly from European hubs.

### Getting around

Coach service **Viazul** ([viazul.com](http://viazul.com)) travels from Havana to Baracoa. Tickets can be booked online seven days before travel. **Local taxis** are found everywhere.

**Railway travel** in Cuba is notoriously unreliable but if you have enough research/resources to have back-up plans and be able to improvise, then you'll have a wonderful adventure. There's no up-to-date train information available online.

### Cost of travel

A meal and a drink in a private restaurant costs from CUC\$10; **street eats are cheaper**. B&B nights average CUC\$20/night; up to CUC\$200 in luxury apartments, or double that in top hotels.

**Train tickets** are meant to be sold in CUC but local stations appear oblivious to that. The non-stop journey from Havana to Santiago de Cuba costs CUC\$30 [£22]; the Hershey train to Matanzas, CUC\$2.80 [£2]; Jovellanos to Zaza del Medio, CUC\$8/CUP 8; Guayos to Alto Cedro, CUC15 [£11]; Ciego de Avila to Alto Cedro, CUC12 [£9]; Alto Cedro to Santiago de Cuba, CUC2.50 [£2]. Hitchhiking can be free but as a foreigner it's worth holding up a bill to show you are willing to pay.

**Tips:** Bellboys CUC\$1; musicians CUC\$1. Taxi drivers do not expect to be tipped. Restaurants should get 10%.

### Accommodation

I used **Cuba Junky** offline app ([cuba-junky.com](http://cuba-junky.com)) to book accommodation and **CubaCasa** ([cubacasa.co.uk](http://cubacasa.co.uk)), which offers an in-country telephone service for further reservations once you've made your initial booking. [Note: It's not possible to make online bookings once you're in Cuba with [cubacasa.co.uk](http://cubacasa.co.uk) or Airbnb].

**Casa Malecón Colonial**, (Havana; [www.cubacasa.co.uk/casa/malecon-colonial-6/](http://www.cubacasa.co.uk/casa/malecon-colonial-6/)), a smart casa-cum-mini hotel with views over the Malecón. CUC\$65 [£47] incl breakfast.

**La Casa Grande** (Matanzas; +53 45 280 842; [lacasagrandecuba.com](http://lacasagrandecuba.com)) is a smart colonial-style pad with excellent rooms, food, and cocktails. CUC\$30 [£22] excl breakfast.

**Finca Luna**; (Jovellanos; <http://fincaluna.com>) CUC\$30 [£22] excl. breakfast.

**Finca del Medio** (Sancti Spiritus; +53 52 40 8610/+53 52 22 9013; [leidy7580@gmail.com](mailto:leidy7580@gmail.com)); CUC\$20 [£15] per person per day, including all food.

**Villa Jabón Candado**, (Ciego de Avila, +53 33 22 5854). Centrally located and comfortable with a helpful family. From CUC\$15 [£12] excl breakfast.

**Villa Yoya 1901** (Mayarí, +53 54 42 7619; [brainwebdesigns.com/villayoya1901/index.html](http://brainwebdesigns.com/villayoya1901/index.html)). Super-smart, luxury comfort, and super friendly. CUC\$20 [£15] excl breakfast.

**Casa Terraza Pavo Real** (Santiago de Cuba; [juanmarti13@yahoo.es](mailto:juanmarti13@yahoo.es)). Colonial glory and fine breakfasts. CUC\$25 [£18].

### Food & drink

Don't miss **ropa vieja** (pulled beef in sauce), Cuba's succulent mango, and mamey milkshakes.

### What to pack

Loo roll, hand gel, a sarong for a pillow or covering, and snacks.

### How to do this trip

Buy a **Cuban sim card** with your passport and CUC\$40 [£20] (includes CUC\$10 of credit) at an ETECSA (national phone company) office. **CubaCel** top-up

cards can be bought throughout Cuba. Get online top-ups through [ding.com](http://ding.com).

Trains out of Havana are currently departing from **El Coubre** station (+53 78 64 6047), next to the under-refurbishment Central Station. Go in person (and with a translator guide from your B&B if you don't speak Spanish) to get timetable information.

**Train 7**, '*El Esprituano*', leaves Havana every two days at 21:21 stopping at Jovellanos and Zaza del Medio with its final destination, Sancti Spiritus (11 hrs);

**Train 11** to Santiago de Cuba leaves Havana every 4 days at 18:03 (16 hrs).

**Train 15** to Guantánamo every 4 days at 18:53 (one day after Train 11); both 11 and 15 stop at Matanzas, Guayos, and Alto Cedro (18 hrs). Train 13 to Bayamo every four days (one day before Train 11) at 19:20 and stops at Matanzas, Jovellanos, Guayos, and Ciego de Avila (15 hrs). Tickets are for standard class, there's no air-con, sleepers or express services. Timetables are often on blackboards and whiteboards.

The Havana ferry to Casablanca (ICUP) leaves you at the **Hershey Train Terminal** where the train to Matanzas Hershey Terminal (+53 45 24 4805) costs CUC\$2.80; 4 hrs. At time of press, this was still out of order.

## CUBA HIGHLIGHTS

**1 Havana**  
 Go for chrome-festooned classic cars, cocktails, the art, the music, and beautiful Cuban baroque, art deco and art nouveau.

**2 Matanzas**  
 Colonial Matanzas, once known as the Athens of Cuba, is getting a facelift. Its elegant marble theatre is due to reopen in 2018, and a musical revival is underway. Check out heart-stopping rumba performances, too.

**3 Varadero and Cárdenas**  
 East of Matanzas are the golden sands and shallow turquoise seas of Varadero. Kick back in a top hotel, or a smart B&B, at Cuba's premier beach resort.

The antidote to Varadero is Cárdenas, a colonial town from where a large number of Varadero workers are drawn. It's untouristy,

with many locals on bicycles, but Cuba's *nouveau riche* are opening up new restaurants and bars.

**4 Sancti Spiritus**  
 A compact colonial town, one of the first founded by the Spaniards, is off the beaten track. Go for pretty painted streets, a sugar baron museum, and riverside relaxation.

**5 Mayarí region**  
 Fidel Castro's birthplace offers remarkable insight into the early years of the leader of Cuba's 1959 Revolution; the creamy beach and sparkling sea at Cayo Saetia is one of the most lush in Cuba; Parque Nacional La Mensura blooms with pine forest, hiking trails, and the tallest accessible waterfall in Cuba, the Salto del Guayabo.

**6 Santiago de Cuba**  
 Come for the music and carnival in this hot and historic city.

