



FROM CUBA, WITH LOVE

Since the set up of private enterprises was given the green light less than a decade ago, Cuba has not looked back. As **CLAIRE BOOBYER** discovers, its enterprising residents have really let loose their pent-up creativity, setting the country on the path to a promising future.



In the streets of heartbreakingly beautiful Havana, a quiet revolution stirs. Some seven years ago, Cuban entrepreneurs were handed the keys to a brighter future when President Raúl Castro officially approved the opening of private businesses. Habaneros, steeped in almost 60 years of communist revolution, seized the opportunity, and converted Spanish colonial homes, abandoned factories and dusty studios into innovative restaurants, hip bars and cafes, stylish B & Bs, shops selling creative wares and light-drenched art spaces.

That game-changing legislation has transformed the city of some 2 million souls, rendering the Havana of today unrecognisable from that of the economically limp years pre-2011. "Private enterprises weren't allowed for many years, but with that ruling, we could show our creativity," says Lea Díaz Ramírez, owner of smart Old Havana rental Suite Havana (www.suitehavana.com). "It has led to the creation of thousands of jobs and an improved standard of living. New life has been breathed into this great city, and we're now able to pursue our dreams."

LIVING ARTS

Fábrica de Arte Cubano (www.fac.cu), or FAC for short, an art gallery and club converted from an old factory, perfectly illustrates Ramirez's point. Opened by Cuban musician X Alfonso in 2014, the tantalising showcase for music, art, photography, dance, cinema and even fashion shows is hitched to the edge of the upmarket Vedado district, and draws crowds of multigenerational Cubans as well as foreigners to its long-weekend openings.

"FAC has democratised art," says Israeli photographer Enrique Rottenberg, a linchpin of FAC and its groundbreaking photo gallery. "Twenty thousand people come here every month to see contemporary photography. It's also a promotional drive for the artists. It's not like a commercial gallery; you can talk to the artists direct and commission ➔"

A The rooftop pool at Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana, which opened last year, gives glorious views of the city.

B Efe Bar is a mix of old and new, with great food and live music.

C Fábrica de Arte Cubano is the centre of creative life in the city.

isn't charged. Artists have secured shows abroad from exhibiting here."

Among the art showcased is a huge mural, on the main FAC salon wall, of a stooped man in grey, looming large with colourful wings, painted by street artist du jour Luis Casas, whose works can be seen across the city's crumbling streets. He has been commissioned by other new private ventures: for a rambling mural opposite Galeria Taller Gorria (<http://galeriatallergorria.com>), a community project in southern Old Havana and a mural of a sprouting hibiscus in the restroom of Jibaro (www.facebook.com/therealjibaro), one of the city's top new openings for fabulous mocktails and traditional Cuban cuisine served as contemporary tapas. Jibaro's owner, physics lecturer Diana Figueroa, is currently awaiting permission from city authorities to commission him for a vast mural outside her restaurant's door.

RENEWED PURPOSE

Cuba's creatives, it seems, are unstoppable, snapping up ruins, flaking walls and corner plots steeped in detritus. Of particular note is Malecón 663 (www.malecon663.com), the city's first private boho bolthole that opened



D Mula Jibara, one of Jibaro's signature mocktails.

E Street musicians are a welcome sight in Cuba.

F As many as 50 artisans collaborated on Malecón 663.

earlier this year, which saw 50 artisans and workers collaborate on resurrecting the 1912 Spanish mansion on Havana's sea-splashed boulevard. Architects, designers and even a living wall creator – possibly Cuba's first – have fashioned a vintage boudoir, an Art-Deco stunner and a suite dedicated to the saints of the island's Afro-Cuban faith of Santería.

Owners Sandra Expósito and her percussionist husband Orlando Mengual Abreu reinvigorate Cuba's economic revolution. "For 20 years, there were no opportunities," says the missus. "We all worked for the state. Now, anyone with a dream can make it come true."

Havana, though, is much more than its Spanish colonial core of 16th- to 20th-century buildings in various chunks of dilapidation and resurrection. In Old Havana, take in the opulent Museo de la Ciudad (Museum of the City), which occupies Palacio de los Capitanes Generales, the former official residence of the governors of Havana, as well as the lush Iglesia y Convento de la Merced (the Church and Convent of Nuestra Señora de La Merced), boasting the most beautiful ceiling frescoes in the city.

Bridging the divide between Old Havana and the gritty residential neighbourhood of Centro – where ➤



A PERFECT DAY

Cuban singer-composer **EME ALFONSO**, who's the artistic director at Havana World Music Festival (www.havanaworldmusic.com), which she founded in 2014, talks about her favourite day of the week.

My perfect day in Havana is a Saturday. I start in La Habana Vieja (Old Havana), enjoying breakfast at El Cafe. I love walking the old streets there and looking at the amazing colonial buildings. I take a short break at the rooftop of Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana in Central Park to look at the most beautiful view of Havana. After that, I walk along Obispo and O'Reilly streets, then have lunch at El del Frente (#303 e, O'Reilly, Habana y Aguiar).

Then, I go to Vedado to sit on the Malecón wall, to meet friends and watch a beautiful sunset. I walk along the Malecón to get to Fábrica de Arte Cubano, a multicultural place where you can enjoy great art, music and dance performances. Within is a restaurant called Tierra; I love its seasonal menu. The main concerts are at 11pm on the big stage. I used to play there, a wonderful venue where I sing and share my music.

The night continues, with my musicians and friends heading to other places where you can hear good music. I like Efe Bar, located in the middle of 23rd Street. I finish the night there, then head to my lovely home.



Grab a drink and settle in for a screening at Fábrica de Arte Cubano.



citizens settled when they outgrew the ancient old-city walls – are the emblematic Museo de la Revolución (the Museum of the Revolution) and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana (the Museum of Fine Arts of Havana; www.bellasartes.cult.cu). The first is housed in the domed former Presidential Palace built between 1913 and 1920, while the second, which showcases five centuries of Cuban art, occupies two Baroque-style buildings.

Also worth checking out are the new Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana (www.kempinski.com), the city's first truly five-star address with a rooftop pool, and the restored 19th-century, angel-adorned Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso, which seats 1,147, and is open to ballet, theatre and guided tours.

Further west, in El Vedado and Miramar – much of which was built on the back of Cuba's 20th-century sugar boom and its fat profits – are columned, gated mansions embellished with stained glass, marble and the most desirable European furniture money could buy; chic urban getaways such as boutique

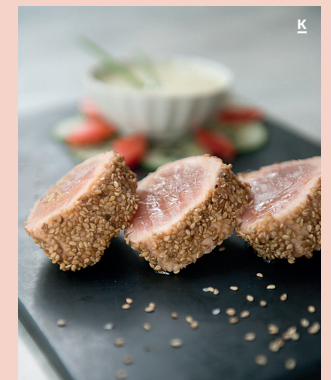
H Eclectic, boutique hotel Paseo 206's restaurant, oozes Italian charm.

I Appreciate artworks from colonial to contemporary times in Museo Nacional de

Bellas Artes de La Habana.

J Havana is filled with classic vintage cars.

K Eclectic's fine fare is made using produce from small, local farmers.



hotels La Reserva (www.lareservavedado.com) and Paseo 206 (www.paseo206.com); and restaurants revolutionising Cuba's culinary scene.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Cuba's new business laws also bucked a trend, reversing a long tradition of Cubans leaving the island for greater economic freedom abroad. Take, for instance, Alberto González Ceballos, who, after running a Michelin-star establishment in Italy for 15 years, returned to open bakery and restaurant Salchipizza (www.facebook.com/Salchipizza) in 2014, in a high-traffic part of Centro Habana, turning out wholemeal rolls for local patrons and gourmet meals for private clients. Or industrial-engineer-turned-chef Nelson Rodríguez Tamayo, a returnee from London who opened ↻

the trendy El Cafe (www.facebook.com/elcafehavana) on Bitter Street, serving up fresh juices, sourdough sandwiches and whopping breakfasts.

Havana's economic renaissance has also proved alluring for foreign investors and their Cuban partners. Local Amy Torralbas and her Spanish sommelier husband Álvaro Díez Fernández, for instance, opened one of the city's best restaurants, the stylish Otramanera (<http://otramaneralahabana.com>), in 2014, in her mother's 1950s home in Miramar. More recently, German photographer Sven Creutzmann and his Cuban wife opened Belview ArtCafe

(www.facebook.com/belviewartcafe), an all-day cafe adorned with his intimate portraits of Fidel Castro – the result of a lifetime following Cuba's revolution leader. British film director Stephen Bayley and Cuban theatre director Jazz Martínez-Gamboa is also set to open theatre space El Garaje in the capital.

THE TIME IS NOW

The best way to explore Havana is via the sightseeing hop-on, hop-off Habana Tour Bus, or in one of the vintage American cars used as collective taxis, known as almendrón, spluttering along fixed routes. Alternatively, go on a private tour to experience authentic Cuban life, much of which takes place behind unsigned doors.

Irishman Johnny Considine, CEO of private-tour company Cuba Private Travel (www.cubaprivatetravel.com), who lives on the island eight months of the year, sums it up nicely when he says that Havana "is a fascinating place at an extraordinary moment in history. It's buzzing with new bars, restaurants, art and music spaces all operating with respect for the communities within which they work."

There is no better time to visit this alluring, enigmatic island than now. ■



L Otramanera's carpaccio of beet.

M El Cafe in Old Havana serves up Cuban flavour with European flair.

N Belview ArtCafe has an eclectic interior that's comfortable to stay in all day.



el Cafe
EVERY DAY
9 A.M. - 6 P.M.

DRINKS & GIN & TONIC 2
JUSO DE SANGRIA 1.5
GENUINOS 2
FRESH COFFEE MADE 2
LEONOR 2
BEER / BEERZA 2
MOJITO 3
MIMBARO 4
WATER AGUA 1

SANDWICHES
CHICKEN, LETTUCE 3.50
POLLO Y LECHUGA 3.50

PLATO DE FRUTA 1
TOSTAD CARIBO 1.50
6-SCVILLE ORANGE MARMELADE
TOSTADA CON MANTEQUILLA 1.50
EGG, TOMATO, LETTUCE, TOSTAD 2
HUEVO, TOMATE, LECHUGA,
TOSTADA 2
* CHEESE QUESO 1
+ BACON 1.50
* CHEESE AND BACON 2
HAMBURG-CARIBO, COMBIEN
TOMATOS-PLATONARAY 4
* TRINIDAD-ZAMMORON, PEPINO
TOMATE, PAN 4

PHOTOS: CLAIRE BOOBBYER / KEMPINSKI HOTELS / JORGE GUIRO / ALAMY (CLICKPHOTOS) / 123RF.COM



Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Cuban Convertible Peso
US\$1 = 1.00CUC\$

VISA
Requirements vary; visit your nearest Cuban embassy for details. Tourist cards must be purchased from your point of embarkation to Cuba.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
The peak season, which coincides with hot weather but no humidity, runs from November to April. That said, Cuba is a year-round destination with festivals throughout the year.

HOW TO GET THERE
Singapore Airlines operates daily flights from Singapore to Paris, where you can catch a connecting flight to Havana.

EARN MILES
KrisFlyer members can earn 6,663 miles with a direct flight from Singapore to Paris, on eligible fares. Visit www.krisflyer.com for more information.

MORE INFORMATION
www.cubatavel.com