

# Dreaming of Havana



Travel writer and author of a new guide to the Cuban capital, **CLAIRE BOOBYER** imagines her first day back in her beloved city

I've been dreaming of Havana and where I'll want to go when travel is back. I miss a Cuban joke, and the way Cubans turn a phrase, fast and smooth like a well-oiled piston. I miss Havana's capricious sea, too. I imagine it taut as a mirror one day, the next flipping its mood, snarling and leaping over the low concrete wall, shattering its fury on cars brave enough to motor by. That is until police close the lanes waiting for the salty tantrum to calm.

On my first morning a stroll along the Prado promenade will lead me to the edge of the sweaty streets of the Spanish Colonial Old Town abuzz with the grind of machinery, growl of a car horn, and tap tap of the clave, those wooden sticks calling out for soulful moves. I'll dive in, dodging fruit and veg barrows, gaping potholes, and newspaper peddlers as I go. After breakfast at corner café Lo de Monik – eggs and avocado and a strong Cuban coffee – I'd check out the latest art show, either something at the fantastic Museum of Fine Arts or the three-tiered Factoría Habana gallery. Thanks to the advent of mobile data on phones in Cuba, a flip through new cubanessjournal.com for online listings gives me the lowdown.

Back on Prado I pass polished baroque beauty, the Gran Teatro, and the new golden

cupola of the resurrected Capitol building. I like to turn east into Old Havana here with its jostle of piles of coral-flecked eminence in grey and modern places in tropical hues. At Plaza del Cristo with its squat church of pale honey, I watch the ebb and flow: kids in mustard slacks kick balls, old timers gossip on benches, pet sellers with stacked cages rolling with fur, and I joke with uber-confident pedicab drivers who insist I need a ride for just two city blocks. Once rather unloved, a through route, rather than a place to dally, the plaza draws more locals and visitors now as Havana's new creatives have colonised the atmospheric square – alluring corner bar El Dandy, Clandestina, Cuba's first design store, fashion boutique Dador, and El Chanchullero, serving up platters of prawns bathed in butter.

At unsigned El Café, I chat to people I know, and those I don't, sipping on Cuban mountain coffee, and tucking into one of their chunky sourdough sandwiches before heading out into a heat-heaped afternoon. Deep in the dense lanes of south Havana, I look up the latest street art, and show at Galería Gorriá in barrio San Isidro. Cuban actor Jorge Perrugorriá, of Oscar-nominated *Strawberry and Chocolate* fame, along with his sons, are rebooting the vibe in these

forlorn Havana lanes with cultural projects, a new restaurant and bar, and neighbourhood festivals. Cool bars and smart B&Bs open up in the ramshackle streets transforming this neighbourhood, once a *barrio rudo* with prostitutes.

I call in at the newly opened neon museum behind the Gran Teatro to pick up news on the project launched by artist Kadir López and his team who are reviving the mid-century neon lights of Havana. New neon on pedestrian San Rafael Boulevard brings a vintage glow back to this central shopping district. And, just up the road, new lights sparkle on the oriental gateway arching over Chinatown's restaurant street, too. I think about Chinese traces that have vanished these last ten years: the Confucio Bookstore, a cabinet hand-painted with writhing blue and maroon dragons on Cuchillo Street, and the crude painting of a bird, with feathers of burnt orange, that adorned the Golden Eagle Cinema around the corner. Transformed into the wonderful Galería Continua, the former picture house is an expert host of must-see avant-garde shows. Last year, French artist JR pasted a vast photographic image of a Cuban boy peering over the gallery's side wall – *Giants, Peeking at the City*. Looking at it I'm taken back to the humid

Galería Continua, with the vast image by French artist JR adorning its wall, is one of the new creative spaces mentioned in Boobbyer's guide to Havana



streets of Havana's summer of 2012. Camera in hand, I sought the outsized portraits of Cuban pensioners pasted onto wrecked, flaking walls, a JR collaboration with Cuban American artist José Parlá. Some of these 'Wrinkles of the City' are faintly visible, still, but with each passing year these pictures of people fade even more, like the face of a loved one who died years ago.

By cooler night, I'll catch up with friends at the ballet, for a music performance, or on the dance floor at a salsa venue. Restaurants Grados, Beirut, Oasis, Otramanera, Hecho en Casa and Camino al Sol will be those that I visit first. For drinks it'll be patio bar Michifú, hole-in-the-wall Jíbaro, and the neon-lit terrace El del Frente serving up moreish spirits in the old quarter. We'll pull up a seat in a darkened corner of La Casa de la Bombilla Verde to hear singer-songwriters, then, depending on what the night cares to offer, we'll go to Fábrica de Arte Cubano, Hotel Malecón 663's rooftop with its DJ sounds and cooling sea breeze, or claim a quieter drink in art-splashed Café Madrigal.

Meanwhile, I look forward to returning and shimmying onto the dance floor. From far away I'm thinking about Issac Delgado's *Malecón* lyrics: "To dance the son I'm missing a little piece of Havana..."

## REVIEW

### Pocket Precincts: Havana

By Claire Boobbyer, 2020

CSC price £8.99 + £1.50 p&p

CLAIRE BOOBBYER is a professional travel writer with more than sixteen years' experience of travelling to and writing about Cuba, and her knowledge and love of the country and its people shine through in this pocket guide.

In the introduction she implores readers to cast away any preconceptions that Havana is a "city frozen" in time, instructing us to "park that narrative when you land."

Top tips for buildings, views, places to eat and drink, see art, listen to music and shop are listed in the opening pages, which then explore the highlights of each Havana district (or 'precinct' for the Australian publishers). There are no sections on the history or politics of the island, and only a brief section on travel tips: this guide aims to show you how to immerse yourself in the culture and creative spirit of the city.

As someone who has visited Cuba more than twenty times in the last twenty years, it was fascinating to discover new facts and information about places I had overlooked in the past: for example, I never knew that there was a shipwreck museum within the Castillo de Real Fuerza, or that the University of Havana housed a natural history museum and public café.

Where the book really excels is in its coverage of the more recent surprises Havana has to offer, especially the new community and creative spaces springing up across the city. In the 1990s the Office of the Historian for the City of Havana (OHCH) worked with UNESCO on the restoration of Havana Vieja. Today the OHCH has given over many previously derelict buildings to Cubans with the means to renovate them into galleries, music venues, bars and restaurants. The book encourages you to visit these recently transformed *barrios*, such as the San Isidro Distrito de Arte. Under the community-focussed eye of the OHCH, the influx of investment to these areas has led neither to 'gentrification' nor the exodus of existing communities.

Boobbyer's knowledge of the city and its people is impressive. Her restaurant tips provide tempting descriptions of the food on offer, often alongside an introduction to the characters behind



the venture, where chefs have trained or worked before, and who the regular barflies are. I now know where to go to enjoy a takeaway naan bread roll made by a chef from Delhi (Buena Vista Curry Club), or fill up on dumplings made with ingredients sourced from China (Awesome Dumplings).

Havana is full of craft markets, but for those who want something more unusual, this guide tells you where to find recycled gifts made by design graduates or screen prints direct from the factory. And for those who really want to get involved, there's information on taking a cigar class or where to get a tattoo!

The book is a perfect size and weight to carry around, and the district maps clearly mark all of the recommended hotspots. Each double-page spread features just one or two entries, accompanied by a collage of photos that give you a flavour of the place and help bring it to life.

Havana Pocket Precinct is not your usual guide to Havana: it doesn't cover places to stay, or list all the museums or sites of historical significance, so if it's your first trip you might want another guide book to accompany it. But when you're ready to relax and flow with the city, it's perfect to point you in the right direction. For those lucky enough to have visited before, it will encourage you to look at familiar places with new eyes, and venture into parts of the city you've not yet explored.

"Havana's magic is infectious. The city will make you want to return," says Boobbyer. And I definitely want to return with this guide in my pocket.

**Natasha Hickman**