



Vintage American cars cruise the streets of Havana

GETTY IMAGES

CULTURAL TOUR

Hip hotels and rumba in Miami and Cuba

Lydia Bell

Saturday February 18 2017, 12.01am GMT, The Times

It's slightly surreal. Just hours ago I was being waved off in my Uber by the doorman of an extravagant Miami hotel, with the words: "Say hallo to my country! I ain't been back in 52 years." Now I'm arriving in Havana, Cuba, in a restored 1956 Tri-Five Chevy Bel Air race car decked out in turquoise and white. I've swapped concertina-ing freeways for potholed, uncongested *carreteras*, and Miami's huge, glistening expanse for Havana's neglected but civilised smaller-scale streetscape.

Until recently it was impossible to fly to Miami, marvel at its naked first-world glamour, then pop along to nearby Havana for a just-out-of-communism break. However, all that changed last summer when six US airlines were granted permission to resume a scheduled commercial air service for the first time in more than five decades, another milestone in Barack Obama's campaign to normalise relations.

This means there's a great twin-centre trip to be had with Miami and Havana. Although it's not certain for how long: before

You are reading this article for free.

View offers

Already a member? [Login](#)

involvement — something the former president remained opposed to till the end — remain spinning.

First, Miami, which jumps to a Latino beat. The dynamic metropolis is the heartland of Cuban exiles, with about 1.5 million there. The two cities are neighbours, with something of the same DNA, but Miami is the yin to Havana's yang.

So while I'm staying in Miami's fabulous Faena Hotel, with its cathedral-like lobby and extravagantly kitsch floor-to-ceiling tropical scenes that echo the lush glamour of the white sands of South Beach, there is plenty of Cuba here.

ADVERTISEMENT

There's faded Little Havana, with its ornate Café Versailles, where exiles gathered on the day of Fidel's death; the Freedom Tower in downtown Miami, with photos of Cuban refugees being processed as long ago as 1959; and the iconic 1963 Bacardi Building, designed by Enrique Gutierrez in 1963. In Hialeah, an earthier, more recent Cuban culture is found in the El Rincon de San Lazaro church, where you can worship Saint Lazarus and then, across the road at San Lazaro Botanica, buy statues, dolls, diving shells and candles of the Afro-Cuba Santeria religion (along with "Go Away Evil" air freshener and tiny rat-sized wooden coffins — for holding metaphorical funerals for unpopular neighbours, perhaps).



The fabulously kitsch Faena Hotel in Miami Beach

You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)

markedly yet, because they visit for brief spells). Where once they were restricted to small, privileged groups, now a quarter of the city's visitors are American.

Under US Treasury edicts, they, as with anyone entering Cuba from America, can visit only under a people-to-people programme, supposedly meaning eight hours of time with Cuban nationals daily. It was once restricted to group travel; now one can opt for a more private experience. In reality, no one seems to check.

America's presence isn't the only thing to have changed in Cuba. A new generation of *cuentalpropistas* – small-business owners – has come to the fore and Havana is exploding with places to stay, eat, drink and party. Airbnb is all the rage. Every block is under the jackhammer. Wifi hotspots have enabled locals to access the internet on their smartphones, and newly installed Google servers make websites such as YouTube up to ten times faster for Cuban users. To give you an idea of the hotel invasion that's about to start, the American company Starwood is managing three already, but (so far) hotels have not gone massively upmarket.

The most interesting developments are in the private sector, such as Paseo 206, a new, privately owned boutique hotel that could easily be found in a Small Luxury Hotels of the World brochure. Tourist numbers have risen so dramatically that there have been food shortages, and I did notice a drop in menu diversity.

“

Cuba is changing, with wifi hotspots, cool new bars and stylish hotels

You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)

replete with American youth (I hear Spotify held a party for its 300-strong entourage there the next week). There were Cubans inside, but I saw other Cubans being turned away.

No one checks whether I'm doing the people-to-people programme, but it is a fascinating way to see the city. Having declared an interest in Afro-Cuban rumba, I spend an afternoon watching a radiant Afro-Cuban woman dancing on someone's rooftop — just for me. She is Oshun, deity of the river, fertility, beauty and love, dressed in egg-yolk yellow to represent the honeyed sunshine that she brings, her twirling voluminous skirts dazzling against the gun-metal winter sky as she spins with effortless grace. Her male partner, adorned in red and black, is dancing as Elegua, the spritely and playful boy child deity.

These two, Adriana and Toto, met when in the rumba group Clave y Guaguanco, one of the island's foremost troupes. They are here today because they want to communicate rumba to outsiders in a more personal encounter. "It's so much better to see things up close, and to talk to the person dancing," says Toto. He was born into rumba, in a household that combined beliefs in spiritualism and Abakua (a secret, male-only religion that evolved out of Nigeria and Cameroon) with a deep commitment to freemasonry. And boy can he dance the Ireme — the Abakua ceremonial routine. He changes into a chequerboard outfit with a conical headpiece that covers the face, topped with tassels, wielding a broom and a staff. A belt studded with chunks of metal clangs when he shakes his hips at the other man on the rooftop.



You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Over dinner at Le Chansonnier restaurant, with its modern Cuban menu, nooks and crannies, and rotating display of contemporary art, I chat to Ricardo Torres Pérez, an eminent economist and an associate professor at the think tank Centro de Estudios de la Economía Cubana (CEEC). He's explaining how he dreams of a Scandinavian model for Cuba: "Dynamic, globally engaged and technological, but with higher taxation and a strong welfare state." He's surprisingly open, arguing that "we cannot go forward in isolation. The private sector is extremely confined. Having nice restaurants is good, but it will not take us to the next level. Most educated youth see no future inside Cuba, and that's a problem."

My itinerary brings me a pantheon of next-generation Cuban talent, with each day revealing someone new: a video auteur who directs cinematically beautiful music videos in this technologically challenged environment; an experimental theatre producer; the owner of the first above-board tattoo parlour in the cobbled, bougainvillea-drenched streets of Old Havana; a lithographer and his installation-artist wife; and the country farm owned by a Nicaraguan chef who trained under Alain Ducasse in Paris and where I enjoy the best food I've had in Cuba.

On the last day I am welcomed into the book-crammed apartment of the Cuban race academic Roberto Zurbarano, who tells me about the struggle of black Cubans and his dream to create a cultural space in Havana called "Café Conciencia", where visitors can hear true tales of Afro-Cuba. "My space would be a place to learn the positive side of black history. Who built all the big houses in Havana Vieja [Old Havana]? Who

You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)

That night it so happens that the Cuban hip-hop act Obsesion is playing at the live-music venue Corner Café near the American embassy, where the waves crash against the Malecon sea wall. Starting out in the 1990s, they focused on lyrics — because they had no proper equipment to make electronic beats — and rapped about being black in Cuba. The young crowd love the music.

I overhear a group of gilded American youth fraternising. “Where y’all from?” one yells. I’m glad I’m on this people-to-people programme, with the opportunity to find out a little of the backstory of what I’m watching. I highly recommend it. As one theatre producer said to me: “People- to-people has created a privileged space for Cubans and Americans to meet, and the Cuban-American relationship will be marked by this first approach — between people who are not necessarily Trump.” Here’s hoping.

Need to know

Lydia Bell was a guest of AC Journeys (00 1 786 955 6660, [acjourneys.com](https://www.acjourneys.com)) working with the Cuba specialist Cuba Private Travel ([cubaprivatetravel.com](https://www.cubaprivatetravel.com)), which creates US-compliant itineraries to the country. A one-day tour of Cuban Miami with AC Journeys costs \$750 (£600) for up to two people. A five-day itinerary in Cuba costs from £2,390pp, including room at La Reserva, a vintage car with a chauffeur-guide, transfers, three guides and meetings with Cuban experts. Flights cost extra. A two-night stay at Faena Hotel Miami Beach starts from \$1,190 ([faena.com](https://www.faena.com))

How to get there

Norwegian flies from Gatwick to Fort Lauderdale from £159 one way (0330 8280854, [norwegian.com](https://www.norwegian.com)). Jet Blue ([jetblue.com](https://www.jetblue.com)) flies from Fort Lauderdale to Havana from \$54 one way



Paseo 206 in Havana has eight rooms and a great Italian restaurant

Stay, eat and drink in Havana

You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)

La Casa de la Bombilla Verde

The low-lit cosy haven of exposed stone walls and interesting art calls itself a “cultural café” and is named after a song by the Cuban singer Silvio Rodríguez. It’s a strong live music venue as well as a centre for dancing, poetry readings and art exhibitions. Hidden in a corner of Vedado, it’s popular with young Cuban literati. It serves low-key tasty dishes such as tortilla, hamburgers and salads, but is more about the performance than the food.

Details Calle 11 no 905 esquina 6 y 8, Vedado (00 53 58 48 13 31)

Sia Kara

Tucked away behind the Capitolio in central Havana, Sia Kara is rowdy and fun, but not yet wall-to-wall with foreigners. Instead, Cuban actors and singers — some of whom take to the piano to perform — sit at the tables and on sofas. It’s mainly a place to drink cocktails, but dishes range from roasted catch of the day or chicken to ceviche, and malanga fritters to croquetas.

Details Calle Industria 502, esquina Calle Barcelona (00 53 78 67 40 84)

Paseo 206

The first privately owned retreat that I would confidently call a “boutique hotel”, this converted eight-room mansion is the Italian/Cuban project of Andrea Gallina and his wife, Diana Sainz. It is the only hotel in town with Acqua Panna in the bedrooms, good free wifi, product-stocked Carrara marble bathrooms and great service. The restaurant downstairs produces slick Italian fare (with prices to match) and a spa is planned for the roof.

Details Doubles from £247 a night (paseo206.com)

The Centeno Residence

You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)

home-cooked breakfasts.

Details From £95 a night for four
(airbnb.co.uk/rooms/10705029)

La Reserva

With its stunning restoration and 21st-century outlook, the five-bedroom La Reserva is the best of Havana's new guesthouses (and you can book it for exclusive use if you are quick). The large, high-ceilinged 1914 house and garden in leafy Vedado has decent bathrooms, springy beds, quality linens and work by local artists such as Damian Aquiles. It mixes colonial and mid-century Cuban furniture in a laid-back manner that imbues the place with a lounge-happy vibe.

Details Doubles from £140 a night (lareservavedado.com)

Hotels or rooms can be booked by cuba-privatetravel.com or acjourneys.com

[BACK TO TOP](#)

Get in touch

[About us](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Help](#)

[The Times Editorial](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Place an announcement](#)

[Classified advertising](#)

[Display advertising](#)

[The Times corrections](#)

[The Sunday Times corrections](#)

[Careers](#)

More from The Times and The Sunday Times

[The Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Times+](#)

[Times Expert Traveller](#)

[Schools Guide](#)

[Best Places to Live](#)

You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)

Registered in England No. 894646.
Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Licensing](#)

[Site map](#)

[Topics](#)

[Authors](#)

[Commissioning terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)

You are reading this article for free.

[View offers](#)

Already a member? [Login](#)