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Travel: Cuba

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Look lively, you're in the land of salsa, cigars and Santeria

FIVE DAYS aren't enough to see Cuba but that was all I had so I was determined to cram in as much as possible. With experiences coming so thick and fast, at one point I went 26 hours without sleeping, which is why I ended up face-down on a table at La Tropicana, Havana's legendary nightclub where the drinks are indeed free, as the song promises. All I needed was a sip of something fizzy and, despite more campy than Butlins, more sequins and Spandex than a whole series of Strictly and a full orchestra blaring out from behind the palms, jet lag finally kicked in. But the whistlestop tour that took in Havana, then the cities of Trinidad and Cienfuego around 150 miles south-east, has left me with a priceless series of vivid impressions that made my trip an adventure I can't wait to repeat.

One moment I was snorkelling in the Bay of Pigs on the island's southern coast, surrounded by vast shoals of the kind of fish usually only seen in dentists' waiting rooms, then I was standing in the ruins of the slave accommodation at a disused sugar plantation in the Valle de los Ingenios near Trinidad. Next I was at Ernest Hemingway's house, a 20-minute drive from central Havana, eyeing the pool where Ava Gardner swam naked, then having a salsa lesson in downtown Havana, eyes and hips locked with the teacher who was having none of his first-timer's British reserve. I walked through the beautiful art deco Bacardi building, as the teeming rain trickled down through the ceilings and formed pools on the marble floors, then came to in the Museum of the Revolution, staring at Fidel's neatly folded combats before finding myself – along with anyone else in Havana with access to a car, truck or pony and trap – in a Sunday convoy of chrome and rust, headed for the nearest beach.

There was a sublime frozen daiquiri in the famous Floridita, a masterclass in rumba at Palacio de la Rumba, the steamy National Botanic Gardens outside Havana where they even let you eat the fruit (though not on the cocaine plant, obviously) and the best mojitos in Cuba in Cienfuego yacht club, where tourists hire boats to sail as far as Florida.

All of these moments were courtesy of Esencia Experiences, which specialises in personalised itineraries and gave me a taster of its tours to Cuba. Whatever your interest – music, food, art, diving, cars, cigars, dance, the history of the revolution – it will create a bespoke tour, complete with expert guides to take you to the best places to eat, stay and be amazed.

Another unmissable experience was the Partagas cigar factory in Havana, where the staff brandished bootleg Winston Churchills. Given that Cuban men, with their mix of Hispanic and African, are among the most beautiful in the world, and the cigars had been secreted about their person, I would happily have paid extra, but was too busy quizzing the factory reader, a former boxer who was about to deliver one of his twice daily helpings of The Da Vinci Code, about his abilities to emote.

In the film reel of my mind the locations are key and a starring role goes to the architecture; Spanish colonial, art deco and Soviet monolith. Old Havana is a Unesco world heritage site and undergoing a multi-million renovation, yet the city still contains scores of Amy Winehouse buildings – once stunning, but raddled by abuse and always in danger of crashing to the ground. One such spectacularly dilapidated building is home to Havana's legendary La Guarida, a paladar or family-run restaurant which was made famous in the 1994 film *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberries and Chocolate). Climbing the marble staircase, there are glimpses of the other families who inhabit the crumbling mansion, chilling out, watching TV. Waiting for us was the film's female lead, Murta Abarra, Cuba's best-known actress, who talked movies, men and life in Cuba, as we ate Criolla cuisine, then sparked up a corona before we hit the road. Spotting an oil leak from her Lada, Abarra – all shift dress and stilettos and still smoking her cigar – heaved up the bonnet, gave it the once over, then roared off into the night.

Alongside all this runs a musical soundtrack of the ubiquitous salsa and rumba, then there's the reggaeton that shook the stalactites of the underground Caves nightclub in Trinidad and the trova-with-attitude music of Tony Avila, who mixes folk with politics, romance and humour, all recommended by Sue Herod, one of Esencia's expert guides.

Another must-see is the colonial gem of Trinidad, all red-tiled roofs and pastel-painted houses, where we were invited into homes that double as temples for the practitioners of Santeria, the religion brought to Cuba by African slaves and partly subsumed into Catholicism, but now undergoing a revival. Professor Tomas Fernandez Robaina, a Santeria practitioner and expert back in Havana, tells me it's a supremely pragmatic religion that believes heaven is already here on earth and that Cubans pray for the here and now, for a baby, for love – oh, and to travel abroad.

Maybe changes are afoot with the new laws on home and car ownership and relaxed regulations meaning a swathe of privately run restaurants have opened up recently. As for Cuba's other attractions, you'll just have to visit yourself and take in the new pop-up whisky bar due to be opened in Havana this autumn by Randal Macdonald of Boisdale fame, play a round at the planned Royal and Ancient nine-hole golf course or stay at the golf and tennis resorts to be opened by Randal's brother Andrew.

And if you do, make sure you spend plenty money because, if there's one thing can improve the situation of Cuba's people after decades of hardship, apart from the lifting of the American blockade or reforms from a dogmatic regime that is too slow to change, it's foreign cash. And the people are what will stay with you longest, from the guides so well informed they want to know when the SNP will hold the referendum, to the women outside the hotels desperate for your soap, to the families living in a single room with a mattress on a bare concrete floor, the sight of whom, glimpsed from the comfort of a shiny new Audi, caused this tourist to repeat the question: "But why...?"

Factfile

All of the below were booked through bespoke tour operator Esencia Experiences, which offers guests seamless access to their bilingual ground handling team and the most knowledgeable guides in the country. Packages cost approximately £3,000 per person per week, including flights, hotels, driver, car and guides.

Restaurants La Guarida, between Calles Gervasio and Escobar, Centro; Atelier, Calle 5ta, 511 entre Paseo y 2 (53 7 836 2025); La Fontana, 46, esq 3ra A, # 305, Miramar, Playa (www.lafontanahavana.info);

El Floridita, Obispo No.557 esq a Monserrate, Habana Vieja, Ciudad de La Habana (www.floridita-cuba.com); Restaurant 1514, Simon Bolivar no 515, e/Juan M Marquez y Fenando H Echerri, Trinidad; Restaurante Bahia, Ave 40. 3713, e/37 y 39, Cienfuegos.

Hotels Conde de Villaneuva, Calle Mercaderes 202, Havana (www.hotelcondedevillanueva.com); Hotel Saratoga, La Habana Vieja (www.hotel-saratoga.com), see websites for prices; Hotel Iberostar, Calle Jose Marti 262, Trinidad Sancti Spiritus, Trinidad (www.iberostar.com), doubles from £71; Hotel La Union, Calle 31 esquina A-54, Cienfuegos, Cuba, doubles from £42; Casa Sveca, Casa Particulares or home stay, Casa Sveca, Calle Juan Manuel Marquez, No 70-A, Trinidad, 25 CUC (£16.50) per room.

Flights Air France flies from Edinburgh via Paris, starting from around £1,033 return (www.airfrance.co.uk).