

## Travel

# Havana's new breed of boutique retreats

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When Cuba reopens to foreign tourists next month, a new type of high-end 'casa particular' awaits

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You can tell your fighting cock from your street rooster. Too primed and elegant to solely squire hens, he owns his corner and sings like Sinatra. Occasionally — very occasionally, given the legalities — he can be spotted having at another in an incandescent flash, watched by slack-faced men.

In Havana, the roosters call the dawn to each other from rooftop to balcony. I walk to the edge of the roof terrace of Gardens, a beautifully renovated *casa particular* — a description that runs the gamut from homestay to private rental — in the heart of the old town, and look into pandemonium.

A man — spivvy moustache above a black shirt and white trousers — emerges on to the roof of a *solar*, a house containing multiple families, to feed Foghorn Leghorn. I watch until he glances up, causing my gaze to dart away over the ruins of the building, snagging the eyes of a boy who remains blank to my greeting.

Pigeons pirouette around the lad, cooing as they perform their strange upwards flutter to land. Fancying these creatures is another ubiquitous sport in Cuba.



The rooftops of central Havana © Alamy

On the street below, two old ladies call to each other, passing the news, *la bola en la calle*. A cart full of avocados is being pushed along. Later, hawkers will sell tamales and I will hear the haunting tune on a panpipe that is an offer to sharpen knives.

Gardens is one of the loveliest *casas* you can rent in Cuba. It is in the middle of a *barrio* that in any other city of the world would be frightening to the outsider. I feel a little intrusive looking out, good coffee in hand.

Yet what is certain is that I am safe, Cuba is safe, whatever Cubans tell you about a friend of a cousin who had their pocket picked about, it turns out, a year ago.



A view of the street from Gardens, one Havana's new breed of upmarket 'casas particulares'

Cuba has, however, collapsed without tourism. During the first year of the pandemic, the economy shrank 10 per cent, a figure that has worsened since. Imports fell by 40 per cent over 18 months.

In neighbourhoods such as the old town, many people, in the words of photographer Leysis Quesada Vera, “work with tourists but not in the hotels, selling cigars, probably illegally, cleaning the houses where tourists stay, selling souvenirs”. They have been suffering. Queues for basics such as meat and medicine are swallowing up days. In July there were [protests](#).

On November 15, the country hopes to begin reversing the decline: it will remove compulsory quarantine for arriving tourists, thus effectively opening its doors once again. It has fully vaccinated half its population, and claims 94 per cent have received one dose. The vaccines — Abdala and Soberana 2 — were [developed](#) in its own laboratories, a cause of pride. Flights from the US and Europe will soon increase and Cuba will come off Britain’s travel “red list” on Monday.



Gardens offers an oasis of calm in Havana's old town

In preparation, my girlfriend Camila and I decided to try some of the city's new breed of *casas*. Havana has several excellent hotels — the Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski, say, with its columned façade, gentle beds, spa-like bathrooms and rooftop pool — but these are sanctuaries from the city rather than a portal into it.

The alternative — the *casa particular* — has traditionally offered the full assault of Cuban family life, with all the black beans, bad plumbing, eccentricity and *cariño* (affection) you could ask for.

But then, in 2016, Barack Obama arrived offering the prospect of a new *détente* between Cuba and the US. Donald Trump would later crush those hopes but the process of turning some of Havana's most exquisite architecture into high-end guesthouses had by then begun. Only now — after pandemic and shortages — is that work coming to fruition.



The Payret cinema, at the west end of the Old Havana district © Getty Images

We start in an even more run-down part of the old town, not far from the city's twin-towered train station. Economía 156 is run by Jazz Martínez-Gamboa, an actor and director, and his partner Stephen Bayly, former director of Britain's National Film and Television School. They met 14 years ago at the St Antonio de los Baños film school just outside Havana.

In most high-end *casas*, you have the place to yourself, but *Economia 156* is more like staying with friends (if only my friends were so tasteful). “I grew up on the periphery of Havana,” Jazz tells us. “In a working-class area. I got a ticket for kissing a man, for indecency. So at first we went to Stephen’s place in London, in Dean Street, and I never wanted to come back. But things change.”

Now they have an elegant house set on a back street that is a palace of gems. As Camila and I settle into our quiet colonially shuttered room, a black and lacquered vase draws the eye, the night water’s doily with its delicate hem held down by coloured beads draws our touch.



*Economia 156* offers colonial charm and tasteful decor

On the roof is a beloved garden, with basil, rosemary and tomatoes. Jazz and Stephen have chums over to dinner and include us. Carlos Díaz and Héctor Noas are two storied names in Cuban theatre, full of tales. We drink Chilean carménère over a spread of vegetarian stews and salads. As they discuss the theatre Stephen and Jazz are building in the basement, I notice that windows set along the wall are, with the falling night, revealing other people's lives.

In one there is the flicker of a television set, while laughter drifts in from another, and in a third there is only the shadow of movement. It feels like a set, which I think suits Jazz and Stephen very well.

The following morning, Camila and I walk the 10 minutes to Gardens. We cross an area of the old town that is fast growing fashionable. Here is Yarini, Havana's hippest new rooftop bar-restaurant, which opened between lockdowns. It is named after a pimp from the early 20th century who became a nationalist icon, before being shot dead.





Gardens' bedrooms are set along one side of a first-floor courtyard

Down one street is Jesús María 7 where, in the weeks before the pandemic, I dropped off friends to stay. By the time of my tour, I couldn't sleep there because they were renovating two new and astonishing rooms that look across Havana Bay, the vast sea pool where Spanish treasure galleons used to gather before sailing across the Atlantic.

Gardens, like Economía 156, is a classic old-town mansion, bedrooms set along one side of a first-floor courtyard. But the decoration is strikingly different. Rather than small pieces collected during a life spent travelling, here the furniture comes from Cuba. Sofas are rustic but comfortable, lamps created from reclaimed metal.

It's hard to emphasise how difficult it is to source quality goods as Cuba struggles. So Gardens is a feat of stunning ingenuity. "Most of this was built here," says the man responsible, Yuniór Riverón.

Normally Yuniór likes to remain out of sight, preferring his British advisers to do the talking — Jamie McDonald, a former hedge fund manager who has the Anglesey Lodge in upstate New York, and Phil Winser, who started The Fat Radish restaurant in New York City. But the pandemic has kept them out.



The leafy courtyard at Gardens

Yunior is the real deal, like Jazz, a Cuban back from abroad. He is making his Gardens grow. “I remarried, I now have a kid here,” he says. “So life has changed.” It is a place that is entirely the guest’s domain, staff turning up only when they are needed to cook or to organise tours — say, the stereotypical 1950s convertible ride, or snorkelling wrecked ships, or trips around Havana’s old mafia sites.

Our tour was organised by Johnny Considine, who runs Cuba Private Travel. He says true luxury lies in who you meet, and swoops in to take me on a bike ride to an under-the-radar *finca* at the edge of one of the big reservoirs that feed Havana.

I'd never explored the city on two wheels, so it's a blessing, I suppose, that Johnny omits to mention it's an 82km round trip. Guided by Yuniel Valdemora — super-fit and with the beard of Moeen Ali — we cycle through parts of Havana I've never seen, through the grounds of the military school and past the sweeping houses of Siboney.

In the hills outside town we stop at a stall serving *guarapo*, sugar cane juice, for a shot of pure and natural energy. And then, just as my bottom is turning into blancmange, we arrive at Finca Tungasuk, a farm owned by Nicaraguan Annabelle Cantarero and Peruvian Alfredo Wilson.



Sautéed vegetables and squash flower at Finca Tungasuk



Taro fritters and sweet potato chips at Finca Tungasuk

Under avocado trees they put on an astonishing feast of gazpacho, *causa limeña* and chocolate cake. It's food Annabelle calls *cocina del mundo aplanada*, drawn from a mixed world. Afterwards we swim in the reservoir, washing off the dust of the city and the road, while a white egret watches us from the bank.

I return to Camila — who was having none of the bike ride — at Villa Flora, a sprawling house by the Almendares river that separates Havana's leafy barrios of Vedado and Playa. We are now in a posh part of town — the neighbour is the Japanese ambassador.

Villa Flora has a pool shaded by mango and cashew, and there I soothe my ruined muscles. I gaze at the blue sky, red squirrels performing a frenetic ballet in the branches that crack the sky. Come morning, the guava bushes and coconut palms that surround me will do their bit in providing breakfast at a table on an open terrace.

Villa Flora is the property of a family of Catholic Lebanese jewellers who arrived in the 1940s, and is probably the loveliest villa rental in Havana. It can take 14 people, 20 if you load up the pool room with children and, apart from the staff, it is all yours.

The manager, Nidia Guerra Vega, drops by and I tell her that after the bustle of the city, the villa's seclusion is a balm and she points out that we are still in the heart of things, that [Fabrica de Arte](#) — an old factory turned over to drinking, live music and dancing — is only a short walk away.

Choosing to stay put, we order daiquiris and let the squirrels do the dancing. We sleep deeply in a vast bed of heavy mahogany and soft sheets until, come dawn, a fighting cock, somewhere beyond the walls, decides the time has come for us to wake up.

Ruaridh Nicoll was a guest of [Cuba Private Travel](#) which can organise stays at all the properties mentioned. Renting all four double rooms at [Gardens](#) costs from \$772 per night; renting the two rooms on ground or first floor costs from \$423 per night. Doubles at [Economia 156](#) cost from \$160. [Jesús María 7](#) has doubles from \$150; the whole house, sleeping eight, costs from \$693 per night. [Villa Flora](#) sleeps 14 and costs from \$900 per night, though bookings for fewer people are sometimes possible from \$600 per night. Lunch at [Finca Tungasuk](#) costs \$30 per head