

# TRAVEL

## on Sunday

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# Try out some Cuban wheels

As this extraordinary Caribbean island gets set to open up to travel once more, local expert Ruaridh Nicoll celebrates its unique culture

A few weeks ago I arrived in Havana by sea, having crossed the Florida Straits from Key Largo in a friend's boat. A port authority officer, perched high at the top of the city's famous Fosca building, came on the radio, asking who we were and where we were from. When told, he welcomed us with a cheerful: "Bienvenidos a Cuba!"

The island is my home which, given it's one of the last bastions of communism and is daggers drawn with its neighbouring United States, doesn't come without its challenges. Yet as the dying sun caused Havana's great build-

ings to glisten – the Morro castle, the Capitolio, the Hotel Nacional – I felt the old surge of excitement that always rolls over me on the road in from the airport.

I was back in a place where people find a way to live against the odds, and where they enjoy the company of outsiders. A warm place, in every way, where a penned-in human spirit expresses itself in art and music. All in a country raw in landscape and roiled by history.

"Just look at it," my partner Camila will say when we have fallen under the shadow of a wonderful bit of architecture. "And it's in the Caribbean!"

The past two years have been rough all along Cuba's 780-mile length. For the first year of the pandemic, the government kept the virus out effectively, but the loss of tourism was devastating for an already moribund economy. Then, as queues formed for food and medicine, the government opened the airports.

The virus spiked, overwhelming the fabled healthcare system. Cuba's scientists had, notably, created homegrown vaccines; that at least gave Cubans a moment of pride. More than 80 per cent of the population has now had at least one dose of either Soberana-2

(sovereign) or Abdala (the title of a patriotic poem).

I spent the lockdowns yearning to travel the country's long crocodile length. One of my favourite things to do is to rent a car and take random backroads. With one turning you can find yourself in the 1870s, pulling over for a farmer driving a speedy *carretón* (a horse and trap) or ponderous oxen, often named "Comandante" and "General". (It's always worth remembering they would prefer a tractor.)

It was unsettling, early in the pan-

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## Cuba

Continued from Page 1

demic, when the music died in Havana. The government turned off the lights at my favourite trova house, La Casa de la Bombilla Verde, and smothered the drums at Diablo Tun Tun. Havana seemed to retreat as an idea. But now it is back. Venues are reopening, and once again salsa, son, trova and, of course, reggaeton can be heard on the street corners.

Still, shortages continue. Visitors can help. If you have spare antibiotics, bring them. Vitamin tablets, too. Pack coffee and chocolate, both of which will be received with gratitude. And bring euros, in cash. Inflation has taken hold of the peso.

It's more than five years since Barack Obama offered hope of a detente in the long cold war between the US and Cuba. During that year, Cubans invested, repairing exquisite houses for rent, opening new bars and restaurants. The difficulties of getting materials here – plus the pandemic – has meant those places are only just coming of age now. They, like the whole country, are worth visiting. The antipathy between Cuba and the US may have resumed but as my boat trip showed, the welcome remains strong.

With quarantine for new arrivals ending today, and a full reopening of international travel from November 15, it's time to focus on the people and the good times in this most beautiful of islands.



## Winter weeks in Cuba

**1 FIERY FESTIVAL**  
Las Parrandas de Remedios, a festival in the small central Cuban town of the same name, dates back to the 18th century but has been growing ever more popular with visitors. Starting around December 16, it culminates on Christmas Eve in a terrifying firework competition between two barrios. Unique, it is gratifyingly close to the beautiful beaches of Cayo Santa María (book through cubagroup.com). Shift to Havana for New Year and be surrounded by music and dance. I would suggest renting a beautiful house like Villa Flora (villaflores.com) so you have a sanctuary from the bedlam. Alternatively, cubaprivatetravel.com is excellent for alternative accommodation.

**2 DIVE DEEP**  
Lorena Gonzalez Casuso is a champion free-diver who is happy to teach visitors the basics of a sport that takes you where, she says, you are "surrounded by the blue". The waters off Havana are magnificent and full of fish, although travel with her to María la Gorda or Playa Larga and it gets even better. Lorena is also a superb spear-fisher, if that's your thing. Contact her through her Instagram (lorencacuba).

**3 COUNTRY ROADS**  
It's a great time for a road trip. You will be welcomed with gratitude and alacrity as the first foreigners seen in two years. Journey Latin America (JLA) offers Trailblazer Cuba, a 10-day self-drive holiday, for £2,290 per person including international flights, excursions and pre-booked places to stay. If you prefer not to drive, JLA also offers a variety of guided tours (020 8747 8315; journeylatinamerica.co.uk).

**4 HAPPY HOUR**  
There are great new bars in Havana. Yarini (yarinihabana.com), named after a pimp who ran the old town barrio of San Isidro in the early 1900s, lit up interlockdown Havana. There is also Loft (Calle Oficinas 402 e/ Luz y Acosta) which serves great Cuban cocktails, including the far too obscure Canchánchara in its traditional clay pot. But the place I'm most excited about, which will open in January, is Bleco. Set on Havana's famed corniche, the Malecón, it is owned by one of Cuba's most fabulous dancers, Lia Rodríguez (@liainside on Instagram) and has the city's best barman, Wilson Hernández, making the drinks. It will be the place to party this winter.



Latin beats: listening to Cuban music is like a shot of joy to the heart

▶ Dance until the early hours in the courtyard at Quince Catorce, a restaurant housed in an old villa in Trinidad

✔ Cuban cocktail: no trip to the country is complete without sampling its famous rum



**5 CUBA BY AIR**  
While the roads in Cuba are better than you might imagine, the distances and potholes can be huge. Cuba Private Travel offers to lift you above all that. They will fly you to the island on an 18-seater twin prop from Cancún and then stop over in Havana, Cienfuegos, Baracoa, and Santiago, relaxing at the beach in Cayo Coco. This trip has the additional advantage of CPT's brilliant owner Johnny Considine, who is my go-to for definitive advice on all the best places to stay – and should be yours, too.

**6 CHASING SILVER**  
The finest natural environment in all of Cuba – and there's a lot of competition – is Jardines de la Reina, a paradise archipelago off the south coast. It is a pre-eminent diving destination but is also the place to fly-fish for tarpon, bonefish and permit. You stay on a live-aboard boat for a week, hosted by Avalon (cubanfishingcenters.com). Having been left alone for two years, it will be particularly spectacular this winter.

**7 NEW CASAS ON THE RISE**  
Some of Havana's most beautiful houses are being restored and turned into guest houses and home stays. The newest, and among the most beautiful, are JM7 and JM5 (jesusmaria7.com) with rooms looking out over Havana Bay. This is where Spanish treasure galleons once gathered before crossing the Atlantic. For elegance and to mainline into Havana's rich theatrical life try Economía 156 (economia156.com), owned by Jazz Martínez-Gamboa, an actor and director, and his partner Stephen Bayly, former director of Britain's National Film and Television School. Or take over all of Gardens' four rooms (gardenshavana.com). Restored by Yunior Riveron, it is a real gem right in the middle of Old Havana's liveliest barrio.

**8 ALL-INCLUSIVE OR PAY AS YOU GO**  
Cuba has always been good for a getaway in an all-inclusive beach hotel. And right now, TUI is offering a seven-night stay at Varadero's Royalton Hicacos from £840 per person in December, flying from Manchester. Personally, I prefer to pay as I go as the service is better. Royalton has just opened Mystique Casa Perla (mystiqueresorts.com), a rare boutique hotel on Varadero's perfect white sand, which I haven't yet visited. The best new spot is Kempinski's resort on the gorgeous Playa Pilar in Cayo Guillermo (kempinski.com). I wrote about it last year just as it tried to open, but it was derailed by the pandemic. It will now open in January.

**9 A SMOKE WITH BIG TOBY**  
There isn't a more storied English expatriate in Havana than Toby Brocklehurst. Ask for a "Tobito" in one of the city's many bars and you will be served a mojito in a pint glass. Meet him at the beach and you will be faced by a wobbly table set out with lobster and the finest grilled snapper, and by the big man himself pulling



▶ Blue sea thinking: enjoy the warm waters and powdery white sand of Cayo Coco

HP sauce and Gentleman's Relish from a bag. But for the true Toby experience, accompany him on a tour of the tobacco fields of Vuelta Abajo, what he calls: "the Bordeaux of tobacco regions" (contact him at info@incloud9.com).

**10 RUM PUNCH-UP**  
Rum, another great Cuban speciality, is having its moment. Havana Club (havana-club.com) is the most famous, but others are fighting for their place. We who live here invariably reach for Santiago de Cuba (ronsantiagodecuba.com), which has recently rebranded and added an eight-year-old to its portfolio. Its website offers recipe ideas. If spiced rum is your thing, well, God help you, but Black Tears (blacktears.com) is the new pirate on the block, its name taken from the beautiful song *Lagrimas Negras*. Most sophisticated though is Eminente (eminente.com), from luxury brand LVMH. They have even opened a Cuban hotel in Paris to celebrate their new drink, just in case you can't make it all the way here (hotelemente.com).



## OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

"Cuba... this gorgeous siren of the Caribbean," puffs the 1948 Blue Guide to an island that "has lured millions of earth's children across the seas within the spell of her languorous beauty." The guide's punch-drunk scribe wasn't the first to be enchanted by the crocodile-shaped isle. That credit goes to Christopher Columbus. Rocking up in a far-flung bay in eastern Cuba, 450 years beforehand, the roving admiral was so blown away by the place that he confessed words failed him when writing about the island's beauty.

Back to the future, and my Instagram feed is full of gleaming gelato-coloured cars and fancy buildings in Havana. Even the James Bond producers were seduced. However, nowhere in Santiago de Cuba looks like the neon-signed El Nido Bar in *No Time to Die*. The mise en scène created at Pine-wood peddled a decadent aura that simply doesn't exist – and, in fact, the raw reality is more thrilling. Cuba's cities and landscapes are ravishingly beautiful but there is also chronic dilapidation. And this summer, protests rocked the country as Cubans called for change, enhanced civil rights and an end to shortages.

Dig a little deeper, escape Havana and the tourist spots with these three regional trip ideas, and you can experience the island as the locals do. But do bear in mind that straying off the beaten path means arranging things for yourself, being flexible, bringing lots of cash (sterling or euro), and getting a sim card on arrival (£22) from nationwide provider Etesca for data on the go rather than patchy, commonly al-fresco Wi-Fi (etesca.cu/telefoniamovil/cubacel\_tur).



▶ Saddle up and explore the Valley of Viñales for a taste of the Wild West, Cuban style

### CIGARS, CAVES AND BIRDING COUNTRY

Beneath the spine of the Guaniguanico mountain range in western Cuba, in forest bristling with royal palms and hardwoods, is the eco-community of Las Terrazas (lasterrazas.cu). Here you can head out with guides to spot the national bird of Cuba, the blue-, red- and white-striped Cuban trogon, and walk among the ruins of 19th-century coffee plantations. Seek the chocolatey perfume of the striped blush pink *Encyclia phoenicia* at the national orchid garden in nearby Sorora.

Anyone with the necessary skills can

hire a horse to ride through the Valley of Viñales, two hours south of Las Terrazas, a Unesco-protected jumble of limestone haystacks and caves embedded with giant owl fossils, and meet a farming family via The Viñales Experience (thevinalesexperience.com; £80pp). Book a suite at rustic beauty Viñales Lodge (airbnb.co.in/rooms/38698787; from £15).

If you are curious about Cuba's cigar business, then tour Finca Quemado del Rubi in tobacco country San Juan y Martínez, 45 minutes south-west of Viñales (£12 including lunch). And – hungry or not – treat yourself on your way out of Havana (40 minutes) or your



**TRAVEL  
WARNING**

There are restrictions in force governing international travel. For more information, see [gov.uk/coronavirus](http://gov.uk/coronavirus); [gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19](http://gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19); [gov.wales/coronavirus](http://gov.wales/coronavirus)

For more information and advice on holiday bookings, see [telegraph.co.uk/tt-covidtravel](http://telegraph.co.uk/tt-covidtravel)



▲ There are plenty of reasons to jump for joy in the family-friendly destination

**PERFECT PACKAGES FOR CUBA**

Its image may be fixed – a cocktail of sun, salsa and Spanish architecture – but Cuba is a country of surprising size, breadth and variety. In fact, it is the largest island in the Caribbean (the third largest, Jamaica, would fit into it 10 times over); a feat of geography that makes it a plausible playground for all manner of exciting escapes.

**FOR THE FULL PICTURE**

Few destinations are more romantic than Havana on a sweltering evening – music seeping from doorways, mojitos sipped in leafy courtyards. Cuba's capital is an unmissable part of the experience – and yet, just one of many



▲ Take in the Cuban countryside on two wheels with a cycling group holiday

essentials. Last Frontiers (01296 653000; [lastfrontiers.com](http://lastfrontiers.com)) offers three nights in the city in its 15-day Historical Cuba tour – but the route also flits to southern rival Santiago, and the province of Granma that neighbours it. The tour calls on Trinidad (the country's "third" city) too – which, as well as enjoying a glorious south-coast location, is a salsa hotspot. From £5,180 per person, flights included.

**FOR A SUNTAN**

As with any Caribbean island, Cuba is a wonderful option for a getaway which involves a beach and nothing but a beach. The majority of its resorts are dotted along its north coast – most famously Varadero, which occupies a sliver of a peninsula, 100 miles east of Havana. If the range of accommodation

isn't huge – the template is an unpretentious four-star with a large pool in front – then that doesn't diminish the scope for relaxation. A seven-night break to the (four-star) Blau Varadero hotel, flying in directly from Manchester on December 13, starts at £908 per person via Tui (020 3451 2688; [tui.co.uk](http://tui.co.uk)).

**FOR A SUNSET**

The majority of holidays to Cuba tend to cram in a lot (see above) or very little (also see above), but a middle ground can be found. Tropical Sky (01342 395 461; [tropicalsky.co.uk](http://tropicalsky.co.uk)) ventures into it with its Classic Western Cuba package – a potted seven-night itinerary which begins in Havana, but rather than heading east and south, wanders west. This means Pinar del Rio, the rural province which makes up the left-hand tip of the island – gazing into the sunset in a blur of small fincas, splashing waterfalls, Santeria shrines and mist-shrouded mountains. From £1,759 per person, including flights.

**FOR SPORT**

While Cuba's tropical climate dictates that it could never be described as "Alpine", it has enough peaks and troughs to make it a challenge for cyclists (its tallest summit, Pico Turquino, tips its hat at 6,476ft). Exodus Travels (0203 993 4514; [exodus.co.uk](http://exodus.co.uk)) runs a Cycling Cuba group holiday which explores the country over 15 days, tackling its loftiest mountain range (the southerly Sierra Maestra), and pedalling the north coast in Las Tunas province. Three editions are planned for 2022, from £3,599 per person, with flights.

**FOR A FAMILY ESCAPE**

Cuba's affable weather and splendid scenery mean it can also underpin a holiday with children. Journey Latin America (020 3131 7959; [journeylatinamerica.co.uk](http://journeylatinamerica.co.uk)) offers a 15-day Family Cuba trip that ticks off Havana, Trinidad and Pinar del Rio, and throws in salsa lessons and cycling excursions before it finally slumps onto the sand at Cayo Santa María. From £3,076 per person (flights extra).

*Chris Leadbeater*

**'They do sting you just for fun. I was shocked'**

**Beware the rooftop bees of Paris, warns Griff Rhys Jones – who found out the hard way**



You may not be aware of this, but there are beehives on top of the Palais Garnier opera house in Paris. I was impressed and I learnt two things up there. One was that Parisian honey is the finest in France. This is because the bees of Paris "feed on pollen from so many interesting plants in *les parks, les pots and les roof-jardins, les roses, le lavandere and les herbes...* so the flavour of the honey is *parfait*".

The apiarist himself told me this. And the second thing was that bees do sting you just for fun. I was shocked. We expect these kindly and industrious insects to have a grudge, or be intent on protecting their honey store or their hive. And I couldn't help noticing that this bloke I was talking to, Pierre, the stage manager, was covered in bees.

He didn't actually have a beard of bees. You will have marvelled at men with the living hipster whisker accoutrement of insects, I am sure. Not him. But he had a Dusty Springfield hairdo of bees. A beehive of bees, in fact.

He told me he had gone for the beehives on the roof only because his mate, the stage carpenter, had started rearing trout in the basement. I thought: "Of course, the basements of the Paris opera! They are all flooded. [Remember *The Phantom of the Opera*?] Wow".

This enterprising chippy had stocked them with prize rainbow trout and was flogging his catch around the 6th arrondissement. (There is no money in opera, so the spin-offs matter.) I'd quite like to see an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical about that: *The Fish Farmer of the Opera*, in which a bloke in a dinner suit, maddened with lust for a salmon...

As a result of this enterprise, French opera had enjoyed an outbreak of diversification and now there were, frankly, a hell of a lot of bees swarming about this rooftop. They were doing what bees do: buzzing loudly, performing that clever dance to show where the disco is happening, and making honey.

No need to be afraid, I thought. Take the bees in your stride. Be prepared for a bee-quiff. Don't alarm the bees and they will leave you alone. And as we chatted, the bees tired of adorning the stage manager's Baret Fair and landed on me too. One of them decided to sting me. I can see it now. It settled on my forearm. It crawled about a bit and then,



▲ Honey trap? The rooftops of Paris are abuzz with new residents

as if casually experimenting with its sword of doom, stuck its long barb right in the fleshy bit.

Why did it do this? As we all know, that jab was probably the death of the poor thing. I think it must be like giving a five-year-old a machine gun and saying: "Don't fire it. This will damage someone." At which the five-year-old nods sagely and... "Blam, blam, blam." They just can't resist giving it a go.

Perhaps this was a juvenile bee with a similar outlook. Or maybe it was outraged by my abysmal French.

It had undoubtedly been told by the Queen Bee, or maybe Prince Charles d'Abeille or whoever was in charge of hive discipline. "Non! Don't sting these guys. They are just sitting there talking nonsense." But the juvenile bee thought: "What the hell." And stung me.

It hurt badly. A bee sting up there could have been fatal. The shock might have made me leap backwards, straight off the side of the roof. Luckily, I was in the middle of my TV interview, so I didn't flinch. I stared fixedly, nodded and winced. The viewers didn't notice. They just thought the stage manager had said something especially apposite.

So if you are in Paris in the spring-time, which looks like the next time you will be allowed to go, buy a jar of honey from the opera house. It is the best in the whole of France and a rare souvenir.

And at least these weren't African killer bees. I went to gather honey from them in Zambia and was told that, after 11 stings from them, you start vomiting blood. But this is a different story for another hive in another part of the kingdom of insect life.

To read more of Griff Rhys Jones's travel writing, see [telegraph.co.uk/travel/team/griff-rhys-jones](http://telegraph.co.uk/travel/team/griff-rhys-jones)

REVIEW: GETTY; ALAMY

way back in (2½ hours from Viñales) to a farm-to-table lunch cooked by Paris-trained chef Annabelle at Finca Tungasuk ([tungasuk.com](http://tungasuk.com); £22pp).

**SUGAR BOOM TOWNS, WILDLIFE & ROOTS OF RELIGION**

Sunseekers fly and flop on the 13 miles of glittering white sand at Varadero, Cuba's popular beach resort, two hours' east of Havana. But next door, and still under-explored, is Matanzas, the "Athens of Cuba", a sugar-boom colonial city with deep African roots. Take in ballet at the restored frescoed Sauto Theatre, the handcrafted books at Ediciones Vigía ([facebook.com/vigiaediciones](http://facebook.com/vigiaediciones)), and the world's only preserved 19th-century French pharmacy on the main plaza. Connect with collective El Almacén ([facebook.com/senderoalmacen](http://facebook.com/senderoalmacen)) for musical know-how, with Sala de Conciertos José White ([facebook.com/SaladeConciertosJoseWhite](http://facebook.com/SaladeConciertosJoseWhite)) for jazz, son and danzón, and with mixed-media sculptor Osmany Betancourt "Lolo" ([osmanybetancourt.com](http://osmanybetancourt.com)) at Galería Taller on the San Juan River waterfront.

Between the Cuban crocs, pink flamingos and endemic birdlife of the Zapata swamp are the turquoise waters of the Bay of Pigs, rich in coral, fish, and war wrecks. Stay with locals at B&Bs in Caledón – one good option is bright beachfront B&B El Varadero ([bbelvaradero.com](http://bbelvaradero.com); from £37). Caledón delivers a beachside location with a mix of B&Bs, independent restaurants and bars. Serious birders should contact Orestes Martínez ([chino.zapata@gmail.com](mailto:chino.zapata@gmail.com)). Martínez worked with Colin Stafford-Johnson on the BBC's visual feast *Wild Cuba: A Caribbean Journey*.



▲ Fancy footwork: the best salsa dancers on the island can be found in Santiago de Cuba

**CALL OF THE WILD: RARE CREATURES, VIRGIN BEACHES AND SALSA SPOTS**

In Cuba's wild east, epic mountain scenery shelters rare wildlife, rivers, coffee plantations and unspoilt beaches hundreds of miles from all-inclusive resorts. In quirky Baracoa, the first city founded by the Spaniards in 1511, your secret weapons are Roberto and Manuel from Villa Paradiso ([villaparadisobaracoa.com](http://villaparadisobaracoa.com)). They'll find you guides for UNESCO-listed Alejandro de Humboldt National Park, passionate chefs cooking up locavore cuisine, archaeologists to show you Taino relics, and bikes to

pedal to those wild beaches for coconut-infused meals and rum cocktails on the sand.

In Santiago, you won't find Bond ally Ana de Armas, but you will find the best salsa dancers on the island. For the finest footwork, travel with Caledonia ([caledoniaworldwide.com](http://caledoniaworldwide.com)), a company that has been running dance holidays to Cuba for 20 years. Need to cool off? Climb to the Unesco-protected coffee plantation ruin at La Isabelica, outside the city – once the largest coffee-growing area in the world until the mid 19th-century.

*Claire Boobhyer*



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