

EXPERIENCE CUBA LIKE AN AMERICAN

AMERICANS VISITING CUBA MUST ONCE AGAIN FILL THEIR TRIPS WITH 'PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE' EXCHANGES — A DEVELOPMENT THAT'S OPENING FASCINATING DOORS FOR UK TRAVELLERS TOO. WORDS: LYDIA BELL PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREA BERNAL

On a day of summer sunbursts and rain, we chug west out of Havana down the potholed motorway in a 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air. After much confusion and many U-turns we find it — a tucked-away farm called Finca Tungasuk that sits just off the road cutting through Artemisa, Havana's neighbouring farmland state. The driver complains that we're on a track to nowhere, that we need to turn back, when suddenly Alfredo the farmer appears surrounded by a bevy of barking dogs. With no doorbell to speak of and no proper road to this property, he relies on them to herald an arrival.

This is the home of Annabelle and Alfredo, a Nicaraguan chef who trained under Alain Ducasse in Paris, and a Peruvian UN election monitor, respectively. The couple escaped the rat race to become unlikely farmers in Cuba, wowing their local market with such exotic, un-Cuban fare as oyster mushrooms, homemade passata and six types of Latin American bean. On this idyllic 32-acre farm, on a picnic table outside their simple house, serenaded by the collection of small dogs and surrounded by

orchids and butterflies, we enjoy lunch made by Annabelle with ingredients from their farm.

There's a Nicaraguan salad of cabbage, tomato, homemade pineapple vinegar and coriander; just-harvested broccoli and mushrooms with sauteed bok choy; roasted pork, smoked with guava tree leaves; smashed beans with coriander; yucca in a mojo sauce; red snapper with a panoply of salads; and some homemade soft cheese. It's probably the best food I've ever had in Cuba.

This has been one hell of a journey for Alfredo and Annabelle. Knowing nothing about farming, they relied on books, Google and the local septuagenarian-plus farm workers for advice. "They taught us about the moon's phases and cold fronts, and about fallow periods," says Alfredo. After the initial amusement (the workers called him 'the farmer who consults a book') they've developed a beautifully symbiotic relationship with the local neighbourhood, where the economy is based solely on bartering — yoghurt for broccoli, turkey for beans, tomatoes for 50-year-old seeds.

At first, the local authorities were suspicious. "I'd find people wandering over the land in the middle of the night, clipboard in hand," Alfredo tells me. Once they figured out he genuinely wanted to farm, they became extremely supportive, offering water pumps, pipes for irrigation and more land. "The markets need more of your produce', they told us."

We walk up and down the gentle curves of his picture-perfect 32 acres, accompanied by the dogs, and visit his musty mushroom shed, his butterfly filled wild flower meadows, and the place he where he wants to build his water tanks. He's struggled to get his neighbours on board with his penchant for rewilding — this is a country in which they still follow the Russian habit of 'cleaning up' the land by burning off the vegetation.

As the sun dips over the glittering ocean on the far horizon, Alfredo and Annabelle wave us off down the overgrown path. They don't have a car and rely on neighbours with 1940s-era trucks to get in and out of Havana when they need to. It's an unusual life they've chosen but they seem content.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Annabelle and Alfredo; bok choy; 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air

Rediscovery // During those years of Cuba slowly opening up to the world, intellectually curious and, in the main, educated Americans became the first to ‘discover’ the country again

I ended up on their farm because I asked my travel company to show me something surprising and different in regards to the food scene. Encounters like these have transformed the way a tranche of independent tourists experience this rich and complex island, and they’ve mainly come about since the US Treasury greenlit controlled travel to Cuba for Americans, via the so-called ‘People-to-People exchanges’ in 2011. What that meant was ticking a visa category entitled, mysteriously, ‘Support for the Cuban people’. Then signing up to a rather staggering 8.5 hours of face-time with Cubans daily. Those Cubans, in turn, are charged with showing you the realities of day-to-day life on the island.

During those years of Cuba slowly opening up to the world, intellectually curious and, in the main, educated Americans became the first to ‘discover’ the country again. They were paired with locals who had specialised knowledge in everything from art to architecture, baseball to black history. These ordinary, yet extraordinary encounters have quietly shaped the re-flourishing of the relationship between Cuba and the US.

Under Obama, the US edict slackened off, with no one checking itineraries at all. That first tranche was joined by the second tranche — the youthful massive, often keen on a short break of sometimes thoughtless decadence. Ironically, with Trump bent on torpedoing the Cuban-American detente, and with the loosening of restrictions around Americans engaging with Cuba tightening up again, it looks like this kind of travel experience is back on the agenda. Which, from a travel perspective, seems a surprisingly positive side effect. For those who want to engage with the appealing and genuinely fascinating human side of the island, there really is no better way — and anyone can do it.

I’ve specified my interests as food, economics, theatre, interiors and the arts — and that’s exactly what I’m getting. Always interested to meet new *cuentalpropistas* (small business owners), who have emerged with the changing of the private sector laws, I visit the first above-board tattoo parlour in the cobbled, bougainvillea-drenched streets of Old Havana. A lot of tattooists left to pursue careers in the States, but Leo Canosa, owner of La Marca Body Art Gallery, somehow raised the cash to carve a funky studio out of this colonial house. Next to me, an earnest American student is having her torso tattooed with a small line drawing that copies one of José Rodríguez Fuster’s iconic faces — Fuster is a local artist beloved of foreigners whose ceramic art dominates a small seaside barrio in western Havana.

Canosa is one of several interesting Cubans I’m privileged to meet. They include acrylic artists and old-school lithographers making amazing things in obscure suburbs; the millennial graphic artist-turned-video auteur Joseph Ros, director of cinematically beautiful music videos; and Alejandro Marrero, a super-bright theatre producer currently running three experimental projects from the university town of Santa Clara.

I also meet curator, Cristina Vives, whose name I recognise because she oversaw ‘Nine Contemporary Cuban Artists’ — an exhibition I saw in Miami’s Freedom Tower before coming here. She tells me she studied and lived in Barcelona, but came back. “I could have stayed, but I realised that here, I could make a difference, and there, I wouldn’t have been able to.”

One of my best dates is with an eminent state economist in one of my favourite new-generation private restaurants in Havana. The night I first visited Hector Higuera’s Le Chansonnier was



the night I realised the food scene in Havana was changing forever. It was 2011 and we dined on perfectly crisped confit of duck prefaced by a miniature Camembert baked whole and tossed in a delicate chilli jam. It may not sound that amazing in the grand scheme of things, but seven years ago it was a gourmet confection in a food revolution that had finally arrived in Havana after many wilderness years.

Today, over similarly fine fare, I chat with the fascinating state economist Ricardo Torres Perez (associate professor at the state think tank Centro de Estudios de la Economía Cubana, CEEC). Impeccably styled in a 1950s *guayabera*, he’s focused on transition economics (what centrally planned economies do next) and answers any question I have with surprising honesty. Does he think Cuba should

follow Eastern Europe, China or Vietnam’s way out of centralism? No, no, and no. He advocates a Scandinavian model: dynamic, global and technological, but, he says: “With higher taxation and a strong welfare state.”

Within the global context, CEEC would be considered a left-wing think tank, but in the Cuban context, this modern voice isn’t quite what I was expecting. Is the limited private sector enough? No. “The private sector has been put to play but is extremely confined. Having good restaurants is nice but it won’t take us to the next level and stop intelligent youths from leaving.” He fears for tourism because the focus is on the narrow aim of increasing visitors, when it should be an opportunity for sustainability. I could stay here and talk to him all day, but he has work to do. ➤

My final person-to-person is part of a magical tour of Havana's black history. It starts in the Havana Bay town of Regla, where I stand among the candle-holding devotees of the black Madonna at the magical Nuestra Señora de Regla, most of whom are worshipping the Santeria deity of Yemayá, the *orisha* spirit of the ocean. It's a throwback to colonial days, when slaves fused African animist deities with Christian saints as a way of obscuring their spiritual activities amid oppressive colonialists, and remains to this day. Their fervour is a pulsating, physical, comforting energy that envelops me.

Here, among the domino players and ruined streets of the grittiest corner of working class Centro Habana, I'm welcomed into the Asociación Quisicuba by its theatrical maître d', Enrique Aleman. His grandfather established this extraordinary institution in 1939 in order to study and practice Cuban religions of African root — whether that was Ifaismo, Palo Monte, Spiritism, Abakua or Santeria. These days the study comes with an extensive overlay of social projects — AIDS and transgender workshops and support, the support of addicts, or the feeding of the local poverty-stricken populace. On average, around 450 people pass through their soup kitchen every day. And this is all done via donation (engaging philanthropists globally), and, Aleman explains, “*Con mucho amor.*”

If you walk to the furthest reaches of this stained glass and antique-filled mansion, festooned with garish modern-day murals, you'll find a quiet room containing the paraphernalia of Afro-Cuban deities, ceramic urns burning candles and altars. This is a quick reference point to the atmosphere of Santeria and the soul of Cuba. Despite the rigours of socialism, Cubans' spiritual beliefs have endured, and over time melded. A typical Cuban could be baptised and read the Bible, consult a *babalao* of the Santeria faith, and a medium too.

In the same neighbourhood, I visit the eminent Cuban race academic Roberto Zurbano in a cramped, book-crammed

apartment. Zurbano's life's work sits within the promotion of black role models and the fight for Afro-Cuban success. We talk about the black struggle, which he argues is in its infancy in Cuba. While the Revolution created a generation of black professionals, Cuba's economic struggles since the 1990s have seen an unravelling of socialism and a stagnation of black progress as the more privileged (read, whiter) population corners the more lucrative private enterprise market with remittances from abroad.

Why is he willing to meet foreigners I ask? To engender more positivity, he says. “There's been a lot of tourism that's been disrespectful or has created a superficial Afro-Cuban culture,” he says. “In the past, tourism wanted to reduce it. And if you don't know what I mean, just go to Plaza de la Catedral, where you see black people dressed as slaves.” His aim is to create a physical space where people can experience the positive side of black history. In his intellectual manner, he wants to call it Cafe Conscienca. It will, he says, be a project that conveys the power, the joy, the depth and the identity of the African milieu in contemporary Cuba.

“Let me ask you something: Who built all the big houses in Old Havana? Who cooked all the meals? Who was sold in Plaza Vieja? Havana was a black city filled with black music and black food. Blacks owned the streets because white Cubans didn't go out. They stayed inside to avoid the heat. On the street it was black people singing, selling, walking.”

As I walk back through the unreconstructed, careworn streets of Centro Habana, the passion of the man's words ringing in my ears, I reflect that I haven't been on a single beach since arriving. Instead I've been lifted and inspired by a cavalcade of intelligence, passion and warmth. I highly recommend face-time with the people of Cuba — and you don't have to be an American to do it. □

PREVIOUS PAGE: La Marca Body Art Gallery owner Leo Canosa

ABOVE FROM TOP: Asociación Quisicuba; Roberto Zurbano in his book crammed apartment



MORE INFO

Finca Tungasuk. tungasuk.com
 La Marca Body Art Gallery.
lamarcabodyart.com
 Le Chansonnier.
lechansonnierhabana.com
 Asociación Quisicuba.
cabildoquisicuba.cult.cu/en

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