

# The opening of Cuba's newest new beach resort heralds a revolution for luxury travel



The new Cayo Guillermo Resort Kempinski marks a very welcome sea change for the Caribbean's largest island

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**A** long strip of fine white sand leads to a wooden walkway that rises into the highest dunes in the Caribbean. There stands Adrien Hermann, a Frenchman keeping a gentle guard. He is trying, he says, “to teach the Cuban staff that they can say ‘No.’”

That’s a “no” to beach walkers who want to sit shirtless in the restaurant Adrien manages, and which perches on stilts above a cliff. That’s a “no” to those who want to look around the new luxury resort beyond the dunes.

But “no” quickly becomes “yes” for anyone wanting a mango daiquiri or a lunch of fried snapper, with a view of what’s said to be Cuba’s most beautiful beach. All this should be available to British travellers via an aviation corridor once the latest UK lockdown is lifted.

Beyond Adrien, the walkway twists and turns into a path, which passes the spa with open-air massage beds and one of the pools, and then circumnavigates the Balsámico restaurant where Argentinian chef Mariano Cid de La Paz creates remarkable meals – the bread! – from Cuba’s oh-so-tricky supply line of ingredients. Then comes the hotel proper.

The Cayo Guillermo Resort Kempinski has 222 rooms that look out over the sea on either side of a rocky headland, set around three long pools. There is a vast pavilion, with a reception at one end and a bar at the other where mojitos are served next to the country’s ubiquitous photographs of Fidel and Ernest fishing (Hemingway partly set his *Islands in the Stream* on this key).

In the bay, seven water suites sit on poles, evoking the Maldives. I live in Cuba, but try to avoid the northern keys, exquisite though they are. Until now, they have offered nothing but all-inclusive package holiday resorts. But this place is different.



Cuba has thus far resisted approaches by luxury hotel brands

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Luxury doesn’t come easily to Cuba. There’s a story that Adrian Zecha, founder of Aman, came to Cuba to see whether he could recreate the “pilgrimage” his then company offered in Bhutan. He was enthused by Cuba’s potential, but then came up against the authorities.

The Caribbean's biggest island lends itself to eco lodges, retreats and super-luxury hotels. It has its mind-altering music, earthiness, and warm and cultured people. But all are caught within a political eddy, in which the authorities maintain control. And they find that easier through the centralised economics of the beachside chain hotels.

Somehow, the Bahraini-owned, European-run Kempinski group is breaking through the bureaucracy. It has already set the standard for luxury in Havana with the Gran Hotel Manzana on the city's Parque Central, and now it is taking that approach to the beach. The Cayo Guillermo Resort is the first major hotel on this coast not to be all-inclusive.

Last February, I visited with my girlfriend, Camila. We took Cubana's hour-long flight from Havana to Jardines del Rey airport, passing over mangrove-patched waters that caused palpitations in my fly-fisherman's heart. We took a 30-minute cab ride along a highway running between mangroves and the turquoise waters of great lagoons.

The hotel is at the very end of Cayo Guillermo and is set on the famed Playa Pilar (Hemingway's fishing boat was called Pilar).

The resort was still pre-launch – and would stay that way as the world shut down in response to the coronavirus.

In a futuristic buggy, we took a look at the sea rooms, passing what will be a high-end fish restaurant. Spidery furniture of warm woods sat next to white walls under palm ceilings. A door beside a huge circular bath led to a plunge pool and then a ladder to the sea below.

We stayed in a sunset villa, open plan with a bed of soft linen, a plunge pool out front and an outdoor shower in the back. But in truth, I'd have been happy with a standard room which, given the resort is on a headland, all have sea-facing terraces. Camila and I stopped at the pool bar for a burger – Adrien had told me they'd found a farm on the mainland able to supply good beef. The burger alone was good enough to draw me back, in this country unrenowned for its food.



The restaurant manages to excel despite the difficulty in finding quality ingredients nearby

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With the hotel still opening, the staff were anxious. A barman brought me a can of Cristal beer, then slapped his forehead, went back and returned with it on a silver tray. They relaxed when they discovered Camila is Cuban, joking about the difficulties of stepping up from package to luxury. As Adrien arrived for more training, I found myself hoping that some of the natural warmth is preserved.

Despite the comforts of the resort, Cuba's other-worldliness waits at the gates. This can be both great – I went fishing in the nearby salt-flats, a lonely wilderness of shallow water where dark shapes of bonefish glided – and frustrating. Camila needed to get back to Havana before me, only to discover Cubana had cancelled her flight, and an eight-hour bus journey awaited.

Such travel issues have been exacerbated by the virus. Cuba, through test and trace, quarantining and a healthy supply of medical students to visit every household, has kept case numbers at a heroically low level, among the lowest per capita in the Americas. Now, desperate for tourism dollars, they are opening up parts of the country.

Visitors need to undergo a free Covid-19 test on arrival and then quarantine in a hotel until the results arrive (usually a day). Flights are patchy with Havana's José Martí airport currently closed, though it is due to open next Wednesday.

My trip was organised by Johnny Considine of Cuba Private Travel, who will keep you right.

When Havana opens back up, Considine knows lovely private houses in which to stay, unless you fancy keeping the Kempinski theme going.



Cuba should soon be accessible for British travellers via an aviation corridor once the UK lockdown is lifted

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The city without its street life has been strange and unsettling, but I'm beginning to hear the music return here and there. And the best restaurants – El del Frente, Rio Mar, La Corte del Principe – are open and, oddly, better than ever.

The Cayo Guillermo Resort Kempinski plans to reopen in late December or early January, once it has made sure the service is what it needs to be.

It seems to be on the right track. On my last morning, I decided to try out my sailing skills on their Laser dinghy, only to find they didn't match up. In an attempt to avoid ending up in the Bahamas, I gybed and was thrown into the exquisitely blue sea. As I dragged myself back up the beach, I found Adrien on the wooden walkway holding a daiquiri. It was for me.

*Two nights at the Kempinski Havana and five at Cayo Guillermo Resort Kempinski, B&B including transfers and visa but not international flight, costs from £1,185pp for two sharing ([cubaprivatetravel.com](http://cubaprivatetravel.com); 07793451652).*