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# Revolutionary Road: A surprising safari in Castro's Cuba

There's more to Cuba than Havana, as Emma Thomson discovers on a surprising safari and a trip to Fidel Castro's childhood home



*The beach at Cayo de Saetia*

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Thought-slowing heat throbs through the grasslands. It warps the air, so the stripes of the zebra ahead of us seem hazy. They nibble the ground nervously, jerking their heads up as the 4WD rumbles closer.

People click-click their cameras and the antelope interspersed between them leapfrog for cover. But this isn't Africa; this is Cuba's wild east - or more specifically, Cayo Saetía, a national park that occupies a peninsula sandwiched between Bahía de Nipe and the blustery Atlantic Ocean.

Accessed via a bridge no longer than two ladders strung together, this 'island' - ringed by sugar-white coves and turquoise waters - was once a holiday destination for Fidel and Raúl Castro. Today, its residents are far hairier. The cay is home to antelope, eland, impala, warthogs, buffalo, zebra, ostrich and camels - all of them gifted to Fidel by African nations such as Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia and Namibia as a quirky 'thank you' for the decades of financial support, troops and aid Cuba provided, as well as Asian species from India and China too.

"We had two giraffes... but they passed away five years ago," explains head guide, Walter, a little sadly. He's been looking after the animals since 2002. He perks up. "We tried a breeding programme for the zebra. It worked the first year, and then it didn't - but as soon as we let them do it freely it was a success!" Now they have a dazzle of 30.



*Zebra in the national park*

The park has been open to tourists for a just over a decade, but is little known. They offer tours in open-top 1980s Russian SUVs that rattle like maracas as they jiggle across the prairies. My jolly driver, Wilfred - already on his third outing of the day - shows no signs of boredom.

"Arriba-Arriba!," he cries, as we splash through the marmalade puddles made from the red dirt and recent rain shower. "Watch out: anaconda!" he shouts, gesturing toward the branches and chuckling as a pair of Russian ladies yelp at the invisible serpent.

He points out a (real) tree rat, cat-size iguanas sunning themselves on the rocks, stops for an ostrich that takes too keen an interest in a camera, and on to the plains where the zebra graze. The click of cameras quietens as a nilgai - an Asian antelope with the head of a deer plastered onto the bulky body of a wildebeest - paces past.

At times, it feels more Fota Wildlife Park than Serengeti, so the next day I swap horsepower for the real deal. Stable manager Alejandro matches me with Bambalito, a five-year-old steed with a spikey black mane, as if he were a teenager experimenting with a mohawk. We trot down dirt tracks, the blue waves of Nipe Bay sipping at the white sands and the sun crisping our arms, toward the grasslands. Wandering at the same pace as the herds feels better. The growl of the engine has been replaced by quiet and into that space slips the sound of the prairie; the twitter of birds, the huffing of the buffalo and the flicker of the zebra shaking dust from their manes.

I dismount to take a photo of Bambalito. Beneath his mane, his chestnut coat is dark with sweat. The strong sun makes both of us keep our eyes down.

"Um, Emma, time to get back on the horse," says my companion, Johnny, his voice brittle with urgency.

"Si," agrees Alejandro.

Their eyes are fixed on a figure behind me. I swivel to see an eland - the world's second-largest antelope - pacing toward us determinedly. His eyes are locked on Bambalito. Here, at ground level, without the protection of the car, the thrill of the African savannah courses through me.

I'd pressed Walter and Wilfred for stories of Fidel and what his family thought of Cayo Saetía, but they'd just shrugged. "They're not withholding stories from you, they just don't remember - Cubans live in the present," explained Johnny.

Craving to know more about Castro's personal life, I drive to his childhood home in Birán, just half an hour away. A spread of wooden plantation-style houses painted

yellow perch on vast lawns of clipped green grass.



*Fidel Castro's home*

Fidel's father, Ángel Castro, came from Galicia in Spain as a very poor immigrant. "He borrowed US\$16,000 from a friend to buy the 600-acre farm, and seven years later it was 2,000 acres," explains museum director, Lazaro Castro (no relation to the family) proudly. They grew sugar cane and reared cattle and a few horned cows and goats still graze beneath the shade of the trees. For his huge workforce, Ángel built a mini village of sorts, with a post office, bakery, butcher and school for the children. "He paid his workers in coupons, not cash, which workmen used to buy things in the 'village'. Ironically, Fidel's father was one of the best capitalists," says Lazaro.

Fidel felt differently. The disparity between the poverty of the farm labourers and the riches of the landowners triggered his beliefs in socialism that would guide his political policies when he took office in 1959. And, in another ironic twist, the estate was subject to the land-reform law Fidel passed and the family farm was reduced to just 69 acres.

The floorboards creak beneath our feet as Lazaro shows me the boys' bedroom "where Raúl and Fidel had to share a bed," the family's Ford Model T car "that ran until the year 2000 - top speed 25mph", and the cock-fighting ring in the barn that "Fidel hated" and where the wooden posts are still flecked with the blood of the fowl.

His mother, Lina Ruz, lived on the property until her death in 1963 and it was opened to the public as a museum in 2002. "Fidel last visited the farm in 2003, but Raúl came only four months ago," concludes Lazaro. I may have missed running into the revolutionary by some 16 years, but spending time in the wilder eastern landscapes of his childhood had given insights into the political figure many travellers have missed out on until now.

## **Where to stay**

There's only one option: government-owned hotel Villa Cayo Saetía. Elements such as the pool and peacock-guarded gardens are lovely, but the staff struggle to produce palatable food from the government-issued supplies. Better instead to eat at the beach restaurant (see below). Horse riding can be arranged and two beaches are within walking distance.



*Catamaran*

## **Top Tip**

A short drive around the cay is kid-friendly Cayo Saetia Beach Restaurant - a laidback thatched-roof eatery sandwiched between two pristine white-sand beaches. The azure waters are popular with snorkellers (currents can be strong) and they offer catamaran trips too. Safari Jeep tours also depart from here.

## **What to pack**

Irish citizens need to apply for a Tourist Card online prior to departure ([misiones.minrex.gob.cu/en/ireland](http://misiones.minrex.gob.cu/en/ireland)). Valid for 30 days, they cost €22 if you apply at the Cuban Embassy in Dublin in person, or €47 via post.

Bring binoculars for wildlife viewing, a camera with a good zoom lens, and a hat that won't blow off in an open-top suv.

## **Get there**

Wild Cuba (+44 (0) 7793451652; [wildcuba.com](http://wildcuba.com)) offers a four-night trip to Cayo Saetía with a full-time guide/driver and a 4x4 to explore the national park and visit the home of Fidel Castro in Birán from €490pp on a B&B basis, excluding flights. They can also arrange flights from Dublin to Holquin (via Frankfurt) with Condor ([condor.com](http://condor.com)) from €750 return.

Otherwise, Air Canada (via Toronto; [aircanada.com](http://aircanada.com)), Air France (via Paris; [airfrance.ie](http://airfrance.ie)) and KLM (via Amsterdam; [klm.com](http://klm.com)) all fly from Dublin to Havana. An internal flight to Holquin with Cubana ([cubana.cu](http://cubana.cu)) costs from €200 return.

Emma was a guest of Wild Cuba.