

CARIBBEAN

Santiago de Cuba: discover the raw magic of Cuba's second city

A week's visit to Santiago de Cuba offers festivals, glorious beaches and a rural escape

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Playa Siboney, near Santiago de Cuba
ALAMY

It's 1am and the Conga de Tivoli is in full swing. With their hypnotic rhythms, the comparsas — those musical ensembles whose sound defines a Cuban conga — own the night. Their cacophony is produced by the Chinese cornet, adopted by Cubans from the Chinese population in the early 20th century, paired with Afro-Cuban percussion ranging from high-pitched quinto drums to brakes attacked with metal sticks. This is not music to doze to — this is music to get fired up by. This is Santiago de Cuba.

It's carnival, but while the garish floats and hip-swivelling salseras of the stands are glorious in technicolour, “carnival” as a concept unfolds in Santiago all the time. There are the official events, such as the Fiesta del Fuego, another summer furore, when an effigy of the Devil is incinerated to the raging fury of many hundred drums. There are also the bolero, trova, salsa, tambor, choral and classical music festivals. There are the gatherings of Afro-Cuban Santeria faithful at the Loma de Cimarron (the hill next to Santiago's famous Catholic church of La Caridad del Cobre). There are also the street-corner rumbas and daily outpourings of dance and musicality, whatever day of the year.



Music is in the air — and so is tradition, from the ancient Benny Moré impersonator who wanders the street in his trench coat, bursting into song, to Los Jubilados de Cuba (the Retirees of Cuba) who sit on the same street corner all day whistling archaic *son* tunes. Here, 19th-century music is still played the 19th-century way. Every day, especially at weekends and at night, the streets crackle with *son*, salsa and rumba.

The next day I am sitting with my guide to the city, Yenia Infante Frómeta, a 29-year-old literature academic, in Parque Cespedes, where everything begins and ends. Every corner tingles with history. Here is the building from which Fidel Castro gave his first presidential speech on January 1, 1959; there the 1515 governor's house, home of the conquistador Diego Velázquez. Here is the famed cathedral, destroyed eight times by pirates, its archangel's wing scarred by the most recent hurricane.

The city's historical racism is inscribed in the street architecture. The Casa de la Cultura, once the Republican-era house of the Marqués de las Delicias de Tempú, was later the San Carlos Club, where wealthy white families hobnobbed. Mixed-race and black locals were banished; Cubans of colour were not allowed to walk in the square.

It's a history Santiagueros have shrugged off with rugged defiance, fearlessness and self-expression. Yeni is passionate.

hero immortalised in the bronze that triumphs above the city's Plaza de la Revolucion. "José Martí was the thinker from Havana, but Antonio — he was the real hero.'

Santiago de Cuba is Cuba's second city and is at the core of Cuba's identity. Its sons led wars of independence, and revolution — and it was the birthplace of Cuba's beloved rum. But, being 869 miles from metropolitan, hardened, global, more moneyed Havana, it's a different kettle of fish. Santiago is cheaper, simpler and less touristy. It has a raw Caribbean magic harder to access in Havana. It is very black, very creative and more heartfelt. It's up there with some of the great cities in terms of setting, ensconced in three ranges: the Sierra Maestra, Gran Piedra and Sierra de Boniato. Its coastal roads are astonishingly beautiful, its beaches ferocious. You could say I'm a fan.

I am keen to experience the place in an organic way. It's good to tick off the classic highlights — the stunning Morro Castle, which guards the port, with its sunset cannon ceremony; the Basilica del Cobre, where the icon of Cuba's patron saint is displayed; the Casa de la Trova, where we hear Grammy-winning Septeto Santiaguero belting out salsa and sunshine as sweat pours off their bodies; a tour of the Bacardi museum, which gives an insight into the old life of privilege and exploitation; and revolutionary sights, such as the Moncada Barracks, which Castro raided in 1953.

But if you dig deeper into the city's environs, you see that you can cram a cultural city break, a beach idyll and a rural escapade into one week without feeling the need to venture to Havana at all.

The stunning casa particular — private bed and breakfast — we are staying at is proof the city is catching on to what entrepreneurial Habaneros twigged a decade ago: Cuba's period homes can be co-opted into sophisticated miniature boutique hotels of sorts. Casa Yiedra, the home of Reinaldo, a history of law professor and his family, in the dreamy 20th-century garden district Vista Alegre, is a vast Californian-style dream home. It's an example of the way designers broke with the colonial construction code, choosing pantries and halls, large windows and doors, big backyards. Space, light, contemporary art, a library on Cuban history and enclosed patios filled with antiques and hammocks create artful calm.

banana, lemon, tangerine, mango, custard apple, orange, avocado, guanabana and passion fruit. Here you can eat beautiful organic dishes prepared in the garden kitchen and then migrate to the roof to see the city, the bay, the Sierra Maestra and the stars.

Eighty per cent of families — read wealthy and white — left this area after the revolution, fearing their houses and businesses would be requisitioned. Round the corner is the wedding-cake Bacardi mansion, now a place for children's vocational training. Other palatial homes are schools, kindergartens, nursing homes or hospitals, plus there's the Casa del Caribe, a centre devoted to the storytelling of rich Afro-Cuban culture.

Crucially, it's round the corner from the house that Raúl Castro will return to shortly when he moves back, having given up the presidency to Miguel Díaz-Canel. Castro's prodigal return is significant. The city has been painted, buildings restored and a European-style supermarket built, as well as restaurants and ice-cream parlours. The message is: Santiago matters now.

Tourism is concentrated in the city, with a couple of well-trodden highlights just outside. But other sections of the province, although close, are unknown and undeveloped. They are also remarkably beautiful and worth discovering. Eastern Cuba is a different country. Here, we are closer to Haiti and Jamaica, with shared ties that go back centuries. The history is fascinating.

For example, the French connection. A small coffee museum and café, Casa Dranguet, has opened off Parque Céspedes in the handsome 19th-century colonial home of Carlos Dranguet Thomas, who had a plantation in the coffee-growing hills of Santiago. It tells the story of the 30,000 French emigrés who arrived in eastern Cuba — up to 60,000 in Cuba as a whole — after the Haitian slave rebellion of 1791. French coffee growers brought their families, slaves and coffee-cultivating skills to the steep mountain valleys about 60 miles northeast of Santiago.

The French and the Haitian slaves were the ones who created Cuba's coffee culture. They were joined by emigrés from Bordeaux and Aquitaine in the 19th century, even Catalans, English, Germans and North Americans. A vigorous multi-ethnic culture developed. At the peak there were about 200 French haciendas and farms in these remote mountains.

damage Spain's economy. Other coffee markets emerged in Latin America. Earthquakes and hurricanes finished the job, and only ruins remain.

One old hacienda, La Isabelita, near Santiago's popular tourist site La Gran Piedra, has long been developed, but a project between the city, the EU and a Belgian-French group is restoring four haciendas on the other side of the mountain, one of which, La Fraternidad, will become a hotel. It will be a new circuit on the coffee routes that the government is building up, bringing foreigners and opportunity back into these hills for the first time in many years. Hearing that the Unesco-protected Bacanao Biosphere where they are located is still deserted, we decide to take a trip.



The cathedral in Santiago de Cuba
ALAMY

We pitch north out of Santiago, towards the foothills of the Sierra Gran Piedra Bacanao, the sierra skirting the horizon. Farmers lumber past with giant oxen. A man on a piebald horse

Cuban cedars.

Today I'm with Alian Pantoja Alvarez, the accomplished *guajiro* to Yeni's city girl, who grew up on this road in the house of his carpenter grandfather, trained as a lawyer and, like Yeni, turned to tourism. There is nowhere to eat in the mountains, he says, so we stop at a roadside café. It's the best slow-cooked smoked pork chop, fufu and avocado I've tasted. At Ramon de las Yaguas the bitumen peters out into a track and we pass loaded donkeys, goats and their kids jangling with bells, children crammed in threes on saddleless horses, and lashed-together clapboard houses that have withstood a century of hurricanes. The roadside stones are painted with simple devotion to a lost leader: *siempre a tu lado, commandante* (always at your side, commander).

Then there's no one left on the road and all is silent apart from the bamboo singing in the breeze. We abandon the car by La Fraternidad, a hacienda with a pitched roof and the sierra looming above that will become the hotel and cultural centre. The house has been restored on the exterior, but the interior is a shell and there's no one there but a security guard. We walk to another ruin, deeper into the forest. The ruins of this once-grandiose mansion clamber up a hill, swallowed by ancient jaguey, 100-year-old algarrobo and caimito. Deeper still into the hills, ruins, tombs, old lives are swallowed up by present vegetation.

Heading back down the mountain, we stop to buy *cigarros criollos* in a tiny hamlet and notice a local with a bar of soap heading into the trees. We follow him to where the green water of the Rio Baconao flows past rock formations and three boys with a machete are trying to jump on a donkey that keeps throwing them off.

Then, after a refreshing dip, we head back to Santiago feeling cooler as the late-afternoon light kisses the endless sugar cane and an apricot glow picks out spindly royal palms on the horizon. It's a truly beautiful scene. In the dusk *guajiros* on horses lead other horses, and round the curves of the hills lurch trucks carrying hordes of countryside people returning from carnival, red-eyed with rum.

The next day we leave the city again — this time for an epic coastal escapade. From Santiago towards Cabo Cruz there's a bucolic route towards the cape with the mountains as a

Maestra, the iconic range that sheltered Castro's revolutionaries, plunges to the ocean. Horsemen (and horse-children) and ponies and traps parade along the potholed asphalt. Tamarind trees line wild deserted beaches overhung with rocks. River mouths make dusk swimming spots. We reach the hamlet of Las Cuevas in just over two hours, a jumping-off point for the climb to Pico Turquino, Cuba's highest peak — we've decided to do the first stretch.

Tourists are obliged to take a guide from the ecological agency Flora and Fauna on these walks, and that's not a problem because they are always good. Our guide points out butterflies, orchids, tiny cacti and the call of the tocororo, the national bird that dies within five minutes of being caged. We take a couple of mules — indispensable when the trail gets tough. We walk in searing humidity, sticking to shade, devouring the sour-lychee-like anoncillo fruit they tear off the tree for us.

A couple of hours later we reach our destination. Not Cuba's highest peak, but a waterfall, Cascada Paraiso. Paradise waterfall does what it says on the tin. Its pea-green natural pool is vast and you can dive into it from the rocks.

By the time we get back down to Las Cuevas, it's late afternoon. I lose the others and walk alone, in silence so profound that the call of the ocean below sounds like a low roar. After a salty ablution in indigo surf we drive back to Santiago, replenished by this quiet coastal paradise and, when darkness falls, a ghostly, low-hanging supermoon.

Need to know

Lydia Bell was a guest of Cuba Private Travel (07793 451652, cubapivatetravel.com), which arranges fully guided tours of eastern Cuba, including accommodation, transport and guides. Seven nights' B&B costs from £3,900, including trekking, rumba, countryside excursions, city tours and musical evenings