



Havana: How to survive in paradise

Cuba is still undergoing a communist revolution and fighting against an American embargo, so what's it like to visit? Antonia Trevini, just back from Havana, has five essential tips to help you make the most of your time in Cuba's capital.

1. BE PREPARED

One of the first things to know is that tap water is not drinkable for tourists, due to the presence of bacteria caused by corroded pipes and consequent contamination. Although Cubans usually drink water from the tap, in restaurants or hotels it is safer for visitors to ask for bottles of water and to ensure they are unopened.

Many tourists lodge in 'casas particulares' which are private bed and breakfasts, where families host people from all over the world for a modest price. In this case, you need to make sure that your 'casa' is near a shop that sells water; you may find one while out for groceries.

Havana is the fourth largest metropolitan area in the Caribbean region, even though Cuba is still a developing country. There are not many shopping centres. Instead, shops and stores are commonly in private homes, and each of them has limited stocks. You have to look around to find what you want. So it is a good idea to fill your checked luggage with everything you need before you leave for your holidays. Your motto should be: 'It is never enough!'

2. BE OPEN-MINDED

In Cuba, wifi is still a luxury. Tourists can access the internet only buying phone cards from ETECSA, the national telecommunication service. One hour of network time costs about one peso. Connection speeds are not as fast as you will be used to.

Instead, turn off your phone and start to enjoy the surrounding beauties – though you will also see how poverty is still affecting this country. You may see people begging for food, trying to drag you into hidden home-made restaurants or insisting you hop on their taxi bikes for a city tour. Do not be afraid to say no, but be open-minded. People are just trying to make ends meet. If you can donate your leftovers or some coins, do not hesitate (you cannot leave the country with them anyway). Besides, the best places are usually hidden in the most unusual spots. Wandering around the city centre, you may find somebody talking about a secret club where local groups sing Cuban songs and play the drums while others young peers perform a dangerous show with knives and fire.

'Turn off your phone and start to enjoy the surrounding beauties'

El Capitolio, seen from the rooftop of the Hotel Saragota, Havana





'Fish lovers should ask for pescado del dia, the catch of the day, but don't dare ask for chips'

3. WALK TO LEARN THE CULTURE

The best way to explore the city is walking. However, it is a bit of a challenge without the internet. Google map on iPhone usually works offline if you keep the geolocation on. Travel guide apps are also helpful, showing the top attractions like museums, forts and castles, placed in a map that makes them easier to locate. One of the best places to see once in a lifetime is Habana Vieja, the historical part of the town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

You immediately realise that there is an enchanting Latin atmosphere. It is quite common to find street food and small shops in people's homes. Particularly impressive are the colourful buildings decorated with baroque and neoclassic details, which aesthetic has now been slightly spoiled by the signs of the time. Windows and doors are always open, and you can sometimes spot local artists performing and creating artefacts and paintings representing the marvellous but thorny reality of Cuba. Besides, people are commonly sitting outside their homes, talking or playing chess while young kids are running around chasing each other. Cubans often spend time with friends outdoors: while groups of teenagers are playing football in Parque Mártires, others are skating along the Paseo del Prado or playing baseball in parks.

Abandon the traditional bus tours and dive into the vitality and joyful musicality of these crowded streets pervaded by the shouting of vendors, the rings of bike bells, the rumble of old fashion car engines and the rhythm of salsa and jazz music floating in the air.

4. EAT WHERE IS BUSY

Every country has awful tourist restaurants. If you want to have an unforgettable culinary experience without spending a fortune, then use the list of the restaurants from your travel app and check the reviews. You may find wonderful places, especially around Habana Vieja, where you can eat delicious Spanish, Caribbean and African dishes at an affordable price. All while enjoying some Latino live music played by a local band.

You will be surprised how cheap it is to eat out in fancy restaurants like Los Nardos, where you can savour the best Cuban paella and croquettes de Jamón, typical Spanish prosciutto. Cuban food speciality is meat, although it is advised to eat it well done to avoid any malaises. Ropa Vieja and Ajíaco are famous Cuban dishes you should try if you like stews, but any type of meat is quite tasty. Fish lovers should always ask

for 'pescado del dia' which is the catch of the day. Although seafood is also a must to try, do not dare ask for chips! You may find boniatos or sweet potatoes but Cuban sides are usually roots like plantains, viandas and cassava, as well as rice with beans, also called Moros y Cristianos - which are healthier alternatives to the traditional British side.

You better start to make a list before you leave for Cuba because there is a lot to try and places get filled up quite quickly.

5. ENJOY YOURSELF

Havana is the capital of a Caribbean island, which means drinking rum from a coconut while getting tanned on a beautiful beach. Playa and Habana del Este are districts where you can enjoy the sun and swimming in crystalline water. You can always rent a boat to reach the deeper ocean or even a flying banana boat, an inflatable tube that you can share with your friends to be catapulted in the water while dragged from a jet ski.

On the beach waiters are available to serve food and cocktails. You can drink Mojito and Pina colada while relaxing on the white sand under a palm shadow. But do not drink too much because the access to the nearby hotels is reserved for customers only.

You can reach the beach of Santa Maria by bus from Plaza del Capitolio where most of the tourist buses leave from and where you can also rent a convertible old-fashioned car for a unique city tour. You will have the impression of being in a film from the late '50s while looking at el Capitolio Nacional, the colossal house of the Senate and Representatives, or driving toward the seaside facing el Malecón or alongside the fortress located on the East side of the Havana bay, La Cabaña. On this side, a majestic statue of a Christ faces the city like a giant marble guardian looking after everything and everyone.

Around 9pm the blast of a cannon at el Castillo de San Carlos, an 18th-century fortress will recall your attention toward a military ceremony performed every night that remember the colonial era and the way soldiers announced the official end of the day.

Now driving down Paseo del Prado and surrounded by the flashing lights of luxurious Hotels, turn your head and give your last glance to this magical place of wonders where the antique and the modern, the history and the future blend together in a vibrant, musical and tangled panorama made out of tenacious people who are still fighting for a better life.

As Italian comedian, Alessandro Siani says: 'When you come to the South you cry twice, when you arrive and when you leave.'

CUBA

WHERE TO GO

VIÑALES Dive into the core of Cuban history at the Viñales Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with its Mural de la Prehistoria. Situated in Pinar del Rio (below), this rural region gathers the best of the Cuban culture and the most astonishing natural beauties. Visit the welcoming and mystic community of Las Terrazas, in a national park, and dive a bit into the waterfall of Soroa, the 'Rainbow of Cuba'.



VARADERO Known as one of the most beautiful beaches in the country, this small peninsula is full of resorts where you can get 'all-inclusive' service and a room with a stunning view of the Mexico gulf. You will be served drinks while you are tanning on the beach. Entertainers will keep you busy day and night with their dancing competitions and music games at the hotel swimming pool. And if this did not make you feel tired enough, you can always get a taxi to keep the party going at Club 62 (below). You will see people from all over the world dancing on Latino songs with strangers all night long. But if you are not really fond of this music, at walking distance you will find disco and pop music inside the Havana Club.



Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Statue of the Christ from "La Cabaña"; Sight of the Che Guevara's monument from la Plaza de la Revolución

Right, clockwise from the top: Beach Santa Maria del Mar; The inside of a local souvenirs store; The national flag hanging between the windows of some houses in Old Havana; Street artist drawing © Giuseppe Caputo; The outside of a workshop in Habana Vieja; Sculpture of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos - Museo de la Revolución





The human side of street art

The story of a young artist's struggle to enunciate unheeded words. He shares more about his craft with Annalisa Romano.