

TRADITION
AND TOURISM
An increase in foreign money
is energizing Vietnam
financially, but some worry
about its ancient soul / **D6**



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Classic American cars filling the streets is a legend — and a myth — about Cuba. There are some, but not many running. Robert A. Dunton photos

Old Havana's romantic reputation hardly resembles the reality

Contradictory Cuba

By Robert A. Dunton

OLD HAVANA, Cuba — I had heard travelers describe Cuba as a place frozen in time, where 1950s Chevys and rambling Studebakers still rule the roads. That theory was scrapped upon my arrival at Havana's José Martí International Airport as I toted my backpack past a row of Suzuki SUVs and four-door Peugots to a modern Mercedes bus, my shuttle to Habana Vieja — Old Havana.



SEE Cuba, D11 Music fills the streets of Havana all the time. You hear polished cabaret players, youth bands, lone flutes and rhythm, rhythm, rhythm.

► CUBA

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Little construction since 1960 and negligible repair

By the time I arrived at The Plaza, an elegant, neo-classical hotel built in 1908 on Havana's Central Park, I had formulated this theory: Visiting Cuba was like entering a slightly altered universe. Enough was the same that you felt comfortable getting out and exploring, yet different enough that turning any corner could lead to an adventure of the senses.

As I walked through the entrance of my four-star hotel, my warped universe intensified. Inside the impressive facade was a simple and unsophisticated lobby equipped with government-grade generic furnishings. My room had three single cots, each with a mattress of sagging mush. The hot water faucet on the sink didn't work, and the television was but a prop that received no stations.

It was time to hit the streets.

As foretold, there were many classic American cars but they were hardly pristine, "frozen-in-time" representations. Most had faded, 50-year-old paint along with a rusted license plate designating their historical significance. Others had been spruced up using house paint.

I saw engines, bearings and hinges being rebuilt from other scrap parts, fashioned with a hammer and machete. With such a severe lack of parts because of the United States embargo and the ever-increasing cost of gas, there was reason behind the array of European and Asian imports now sharing the roads.

In the old, old town

I ventured east into the best-preserved section of Habana Vieja. I turned down Obispo, an enchanting street built during an earlier, pedestrian era. The clip-clop of horse-driven carriages, smooth cigar smoke and faint salsa music surrounded me.

There has been little new construction since 1960 (the area has been a protected UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1982), and woefully little repair.

Bicycle bells rang and local families wandered arm in arm. A vast multistory department store sat empty except for a lone employee sitting at a solitary desk in the center of the vacated sales floor. Next door was a small shop, freshly painted and lit with an overabundance of fluorescent lights, selling everything from bicycles and fans to chips and bras.

On every other corner stood a bored, slightly ruffled police officer (a local told us jokingly "Ah Havana — a city of 3 million people: 1 million citizens and 2 million policemen!").

Get up and dance

The guidebooks may have been a bit



Despite Cuba's many problems — crumbling buildings, disastrous economy, corroded infrastructure and a flawed communist system — the people display an incredible liveliness, friendliness and zest for life. Robert A. Dunton

If you go / Havana

- **GETTING THERE:** Cuba is not actually off-limits to Americans, but without a special license from the Treasury Department, U.S. citizens are prohibited from spending money in Cuba or from purchasing Cuban tour packages locally or abroad. Cuba welcomes Americans within the same guidelines as citizens from other countries. Certain researchers, students, journalists and humanitarians qualify for special licenses. Of the estimated 40,000 to 50,000 Americans who annually visit Cuba illegally, approximately 200 to 400 are prosecuted or fined.
- **READ THE RULES:** www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/sanctions/t11cuba.pdf; www.cubatrade.org/visit.html; www.cuba.tc/
- **WHERE TO STAY:** (These are rack rates, not package rates. Packages are much cheaper.)
- **Hotel Florida** (Obispo No. 252, phone: 624127, fax: 624117) 25 rooms in a renovated colonial mansion in the heart of Old Ha-

vana. \$100-\$180 double. www.cuba.tc/cuflorida.html

- **Hotel Santa Isabel** (Baratillo No. 9, phone: 33-8302 fax 33-8391) Formerly the Count of Santovenia's Palace on Plaza de Armas. 17 rooms, 10 suites \$165-\$200 double. www.cuba.tc/havana/cuhavsantaisabel.html.

- Private rooms in homes: \$10-\$40. Lonely Planet's Cuba guide has a good list.

- **WHERE TO EAT:** Food in Cuba is generally bad.

- **Cafe Paris** (Obispo No. 202): Dinner, including beer, about \$10.

- **Restaurante El Patio** (San Ignacio No. 54): ice cream, sandwiches; a shaded inner courtyard of an colonial palace on the Plaza del la Catedral. \$3-\$10.

- **GUIDEBOOK:** Lonely Planet's Cuba (2nd edition July 2000), ISBN: 0-86442-750-6, \$19.99.

— ROBERT A. DUNTON

skewed about Havana being frozen in time, but they were right about its eternal state of music. Passionate, stirring, acoustic music was everywhere, all the time.

Musicians were hired by the bars and restaurants, and their sounds spilled into the streets and squares. As soon as I left one ensemble behind, a faint bass line or shrill flute would float in from the distance, drawing me to the next venue. Music became a constant companion.

For the many families residing in Old

Havana, music is as abundant as air, providing a steady stream of free entertainment. Babies rode on mother's and father's hips as their parents gyrated in the streets.

Outside the Cafe Paris, a 4-year-old boy with rhythm in his blood clacked two stray Coke bottles together in perfect syncopation with a jamming quintet. I took the hand of a bobbing Creole woman in her 60s, decked out in bright pink spandex pants, and we danced playfully on the cobbled Plaza de Armas. Who could help themselves? The

music was infectious.

Decay and abandonment

In some residential neighborhoods, water trucks were parked every few blocks as the only source of water.

Locals told me that replacing and burying the power lines and repairing the water lines was too burdensome to be managed at once. So, because the citizens could carry water, but not electricity, the water was shut off as street after street was torn up and new power lines laid. All water must be carried by bucket from water truck to apartment.

Cuba is a country that time not so much forgot, but resources and money abandoned. A glorious city in its day, Habana Vieja now displays crumbling examples of some of the finest neoclassical, art deco, colonial, baroque, and Mediterranean buildings ever built tucked along narrow, cobbled streets.

The decay is the result of a double whammy — the effects of a flawed communist system and the impact of a highly effective U.S. embargo. So for lack of a \$50 pipe to make a small repair, a whole, wonderful baroque building is ruined when over time, it is soaked by water.

Wandering the streets, alleyways, and buildings, it is tremendously sad to see such a magnificent city rotting before my eyes.

Imagine visiting Rome in the midst of its decline. Like the time-ravaged pyramids of Giza or Maya temples of Tulum, there is a story behind Havana's decay that makes it all the more mystical, a structural relic abuzz with friendly, passionate and talented inhabitants.

Robert A. Dunton is a San Diego writer.

A minute slice of the authentic Cuba

Home plate was the corner curb of a cobblestone street a block off Havana's *malecón*, a seaside boulevard that skirts the azure Caribbean.

Rogelio, a strong 11-year-old, wound up for the pitch, then uncurled like a hyperactive jack-in-the-box released from its cube. A handful of ragtag friends, hands on knees, were poised for action.

The soft-rubber ball ripped toward Chucho, age 9. He had no bat; in fact, no one he knew owned one. Chucho swung his bare arm instead, smacking the ball with the inside of his forearm. The ball launched up, out and away, almost half a block before it slammed into the decaying plaster exterior of what 75 years ago had been a sleek art deco building.

He ran, tagged the lamp-post (first base), barreled toward the piece of cardboard that was second, and rounded third — an aged shoe. The ball, gathered up by a lanky outfielder, was tossed over a Ford Fairlane under repair and flew toward 15 excited players who were rushing home plate.

The ball landed short and bounced high over the street into the door frame of a vacated storefront. Chucho sauntered toward the corner curb, tagged it with one foot, and then rotated out into the "field."

Home run — Havana style!

Was I witnessing the auspicious beginnings of the next generation of Cuban baseball, played with no gloves, bat, field or regulation ball? I couldn't tell you, but this I know: I was catching a glimpse of authentic Cuba: athletic, passionate, good-natured, resourceful, and family-oriented — finding more joy in life than even they realized, and all the while linked surreptitiously — through currency, culture and sport — to their ubiquitous neighbor to the north.

— ROBERT DUNTON