



photography: Stephan Smith

## Cuba

Christopher Columbus might have discovered Cuba in 1492 but as one sun worshipper to another can tell you, Canadians have laid claim to the endless beach towels that blanket the powder white beaches. With its unbeatable value, we love Cuba so much that Statistics Canada reported over 600,000 Canadian tourists visited the island country last year.

But unlike so many who shoot for the big resort strip of Varadero, we aimed our sun-packed vacation to visit sights like Havana regaled for its rich history and lively culture that pops at every corner. By night, it was bar hopping at the smoke-filled night

clubs with cool ceiling fans pivoting to jazz rhythms. By day, it was a stroll along the Malecon that ended at Cathedral Square.

In the land of Hemingway, the Buena Vista Social Club, and cult figure Che Guevara not to mention the generalissimo himself, Fidel Castro, our one-week visit was spent exploring the other parts of Cuba. We knew out of the 14 provinces that comprise the Caribbean's largest island, we'd only bite off a morsel. But in the end, I confess we ended our trip soaking up the rays at Varadero's soft sandy beach.

Here's how you can step into Cuba.

## Havana

Punctuated by images of a city locked in the fifties as vintage Chevy's drive by, Cuba's capital welcomes turistas to its Spanish colonial style and to favourite haunts like the legendary Tropicana.

Hemingway fans unite. Havana is packed with the renowned writer's favourite haunts which are still open. We dropped by his watering hole, El Floridita festooned with images of him and Castro, ponied up to the bar and ordered the famous Daiquiri.

If you still wish to linger in cool surroundings venture next door to the Casa del ron y del tabaco cubano and observe temperature controlled cigar cabinets locked for all to see and purchase. While here note the selection of Cuban rum, cigars and coffee. A bottle of 7-year-old Havana Club sells for about 11CUC (Cuban convertible pesos) or about \$11 Canadian. Back home expect to pay about \$30.

Further down Calle Obispo, Hotel Ambos Mundos awaits. We ordered an Americano coffee so strong hair could grow on your chest as a local jazz band performed at the lobby bar. Afterwards it was off to visit Room 511. Left as if Papa popped out for a minute, this room was where he stayed in the thirties while he wrote "For Whom the Bell Tolls." At this Hemingway Shrine be prepared to spot his

typewriter and get a view of the thriving street life below.

Next on our list was to roam through Habana Vieja (Old Havana) where this UNESCO World Heritage Site is currently undergoing a slow makeover as many facades sadly crumble and decay before you. We ventured inside Catedral de San Cristobal, and took an amusing rickshaw ride through the back alleys. It's easy to spend an afternoon here so wear comfortable walking shoes.

Always on the prowl for art, we got a taste of the contemporary art scene and gained a new appreciation for Cuba's national artists as we visited the recently renovated National Museum of Fine Arts, part of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Cuba. I learned artists such as Alfredo Sosabravo and Umberto Pena were influenced by avante garde artists from the United States ironically.

## Matanzas

Matanzas I discovered is famous for several reasons. The country's second largest province once held private residences for the rich and famous who built some of the country's first palatial mansions. Matanzas is also home to the now famous Bay of Pigs, and to boot, the country's highest number of tourism attractions are here. Varadero many will argue is the world's best beach.

If time permits, drop by Matanzas City, the province's capital known as the "Venice of Cuba" for its series of bridges which makes for an interesting tour. As we weren't ready to experience Varadero yet – the idyllic beach we heard so much about – we toured Matanzas City and took in an afternoon musical performance at the Sauto Teatro before continuing the ride enroute to Varadero about 30km away.

## Varadero

The Spanish might have discovered La Calavera salt mines during the 17th century which for years was the only one of its kind in the New World. But it was thanks to a rich American industrialist Irene DuPont who saw the beauty of Varadero's sun-kissed coastline that meshed with the breezy temperatures. He immediately put his visionary skills in motion.

The grand scheme for posh elegance in Cuba quickly transcended over America's social elite. The story goes how during the Roaring Twenties right before the Great Depression, DuPont contacted the two architects of Havana's Capitolio and hired them to design an 11-room dream house using imported marble and the finest woods.

Dubbed Xanadu Mansion after the former kingdom of the Tartars, Renee spent many years entertaining the glitterati of the day but never returned after the Revolution. Today, the Xanadu mansion functions



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as the Varadero Golf Clubhouse and has a stunning bar and restaurant.

A tourist Mecca, Varadero beckons for fun and sun. We scanned our guide book and decided that Josone Park revered as Varadero's tiny green lung in the heart of Varadero could be toured later. Instead it was time for the beach. Towels in hand, we thundered across the cool soft sand and picked two abandoned lawn chairs as we joined the group of sun lovers enveloping the clear blue sea. Viva Cuba I say!