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HIGH LIFE

EXPLORING CUBA

HAVANA REDUX

BY CHRISTOPHER BAKER

SLIP on your best Guayabera, grab a bottle of añejo rum and brush up on those all-important Spanish pick-up lines, because we're going to Cuba. For decades the enigmatic island nation has attracted adventurous spirits, seduced by decaying Spanish architecture, Eisenhower-era Cadillacs and dark-eyed Cubanas. Among the socialist republic's devotees include Ernest Hemmingway, Jack Nicholson and Hunter S. Thompson.

See the appeal for yourself as we follow Christopher Baker on his journey through the bars, nightclubs and cabarets of one of the most alluring Caribbean destinations.

EXPLORING CUBA

VIVA CUBA

WITH all the hoopla about politics, it's easy to overlook the sheer beauty of Cuba. The talcum beaches. The chartreuse cane-fields. The emerald mountains and valleys full of dramatic formations. The ancient cities evocative of the once-mighty power of Spain. The whiff of cigar smoke and sea mist wafting over Havana's seafront Malecón boulevard as the sun sets and the city succumbs to nights of sexy showgirls and sizzling salsa. Ah... the music! Everywhere music hot enough to cook the pork. Watching Cubans dance groin to groin, it's a surprise the birthrate isn't higher. Socialism and sensuality? You'll love it!

Before the revolution, Havana was a place of intrigue and tawdry romance. The whiff, the intimation, still lingers. Sure, the Revolution shuttered the strip clubs, but Communism hasn't made a dent in Cubans' renowned promiscuity. "Dark-eyed Stellas light their fella's panatelas," American songwriter Irving Berlin wrote. Possibility hangs in the air like intoxicating aromas of añejo rum.

Your first reaction is of having arrived at a Hollywood stage set. Habana Vieja – the city's remarkable colonial core – overflows with castles, convents and cobbled plazas that gleam afresh after restoration like confections in stone. Street after street of once tony, now slightly derelict, "modern" Havana are lined with astonishing Beaux Arts, Art Deco, and Modernist buildings. Many are corroded to the point of dilapidation, with grimy decades-old adverts for Hotpoint and Singer soldered by tropical heat onto weathered façades. Cars from the Eisenhower era are everywhere, too, their fins sharp enough to draw blood, conjuring up the decadent pre-revolutionary decades of martinis and mafiosi.



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DRINK LIKE HEMMINGWAY

THERE are mojitos and daiquiris to savour. And the world's finest cigars to smoke fresh from the factory as you rumble down the highway in a chrome-laden '55 Cadillac to the rhythm of the rumba on the radio. In fact, your first move should be to hire a convertible classic car (they're found outside every hotel) and head to Fábrica H. Uppmann for a cigar factory tour. Contrary to popular myth, cigars aren't rolled on the thighs of dusky maidens. But the wink of the pretty female torcederas (rollers) hints that many would happily indulge more than the fantasy.

Walking Havana's streets you sense you're living inside a romantic thriller. It's intoxicating. Still laced with the sharp edges and sinister shadows that made Ernest Hemingway want "to stay here forever." Cuba was a salacious environment to pursue writing; its women



lustily and libertine. It still is. They still are.

"Mi mojito en El Bodeguita, mi daiquiri in La Floridita" the novelist had scrawled on the sky-blue walls of El Bodeguita del Medio, Hemingway's watering hole half a block from Havana's antique cathedral. Errol Flynn thought it "A great place to get drunk." They are there in black and white on a wall, squinting at the camera through a haze of rum and cigar smoke. On a recent visit, I settled myself at the bar to sample the proletarian fusion of dialectics and rum. Seduction, however, crept in. I sipped a mojito, the rum mint julep that Hemingway brought out of obscurity. They were strong, and as a sultry cubana stared into my eyes I sensed a glimmer of the "other charms" to which Hemingway had succumbed.

Havana's appeal owes much to this inescapable louche demimonde. But things are changing.



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END OF AN ERA

ONE day last June I was strolling along a cobbled street in Habana Vieja when my pal Ernesto Guevara, son of Che (yes, the revolutionary icon), bounded out of a bar and embraced me. Like his dad, Ernesto "El" is a motorcycle enthusiast. When I first met him about five years ago, he was riding a jade-colored 1948 Harley-Davidson Flathead around the tumbledown streets. Now, after dining together at a newly opened bar-restaurant – Chacón 162 – in Cinco Esquinas, Havana's trendy epicentre of sudden gentrification, Ernesto rode off on a 2015 Electra Glide Ultra Classic.

Suddenly I need a neck restraint to stop doing double-takes as young entrepreneurs burst out of their straight-jackets. Every third building in this overcrowded, once-sclerotic quarter is in the throes of a remake as a boutique B&B or hip restaurant exuding colonial-tinged Miami chic, or – what's this? – a gourmet heladería selling homemade gelato ice creams.

One of my favourite new hang-outs is Sia Kara, behind the Capitolio – the 1930s rip-off of Washington's neoclassical Capitol building. The brainchild of Cuban ballet dancer José Manuel Carreño and his partner, French-born artist Mateo Royer, Sia Kara is an off-beat artsy hang-out for Havana's cultural elite, who settle in on its well-stuffed sofas and canoodle in the loft-style lounge. The mojitos are superb, as is the caipiroska – a "caipíinha" made of vodka.



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EAT, DANCE, GIRLS

THE one paladar (private restaurant) not to miss is La Guarida, on the third floor of a formerly glamorous, now dilapidated 19th-century townhouse. The crowded *ciudadela* (tenement) belongs in a Fellini movie. The crumbling staircase, lent an operatic air by hanging laundry, delivers you into a world-class Parisian-style restaurant beloved by Cuban models, foreign diplomats and visiting VIPs (from Jack Nicholson to, more recently, Beyoncé, Rihanna and Madonna). After a dinner – maybe gazpacho, an out-of-this-world roast chicken in orange sauce and honey, plus lemon pie – head to the alfresco rooftop bar for postprandial cocktails.

If La Guarida is booked solid, go to El Cocinero. Its spiral staircase augers up through a red-brick chimney and spills you onto a chic rooftop tapas restaurant, conjured by visionary owners from a former cooking-oil factory. Havana's young *tarandula* (bohemian in-crowd) hit on each other over cocktails before streaming downstairs to the adjoining *Fábrica de Arte*, an avant-garde cultural venue. The night's fare includes an acrobatic dance performance, an erotic art expo, and DJ Iván Lejardi's experimental electronic rave.

Havana's equivalent to Sydney's Marquee is salsa-hot Sangre-La. Mick Jagger chose it to get wild – it's known for kick-ass cocktails and *jiniteras* (hookers) – after playing a free concert in Havana in July 2016. For something classier, try high-octane Sarao's. With its slick modern design, this Miami-style, neon-lit nightclub (the brainchild of several techno DJs and hip-hop artists) is the hot spot for discerning party animals, not least Usher and Katy Perry. The gorgeous female millennials wait staff is as alluring as the stunning Cubana clientele exuding an eye-pleasing Latin penchant for minimal clothing.

Warm up for your dance-until-dawn Sarao experience at Tropicana, the saucy open-air extravaganza – Girls! Girls!

Girls! – now in its eighth decade of stiletto-heeled titillation: Cubans love saucy cabarets *espectáculos* (shows) with lots of gratuitous skin. Every town has one, though none can compete with Tropicana, which first opened on New Year's Eve 1939 and makes a fitting finale to any Havana vacation.

During one recent visit, I watched mesmerised as mocha-skinned *mulatas* paraded among floodlit palm trees, quivering their sequined G-strings and feathers like tropical birds. Voluptuous *figurantes* (showgirls) then streamed off stage, and an arm reached out, drawing me into the aisle to dance. My partner was beyond drop-dead gorgeous. "You're beautiful! I'll wait for you outside," I blurted as the troupe turned tail and rushed back to the stage for the frenzied finale.

To my astonishment, she appeared, dressed all in white, including a turban (she'd been shaved), calf-length skirt and thigh-high stockings. Copper amulets glinted upon her arms, and she wore many necklaces – collares – of colourful beads. She'd just been initiated into the *Santería* religion in a secret ceremony that included animal sacrifice. Mercedes believed herself now possessed by an *orisha* (a god of the African Yoruba pantheon) and she lived at this moment in a high state of grace.

We hailed an illegal taxi (a '53 Ford with blackened windows), tucked ourselves in the back seat, and rode hand in hand through the dim-lit streets of Havana. Suddenly, a policeman leapt into our path and frantically waved down the jalopy. A man lay at the roadside like a fetus steeped in his own pool of blood. The policeman wanted to bundle him into the car and commandeer it for a trip to the hospital.

"Ay, mi dios!" Mercedes exclaimed. She leant forward and spoke through the driver's window. The policeman, a young black man, looked aghast, then waved us on and ran off to look for another car.