

# AUTHENTIC *Cuba*

There's still time to explore the island nation in all its gritty glory before American influences forever alter its character

BY SUZANNE MORPHET



The memorable sights and sounds of Havana include (clockwise from above) bustling marketplaces; streets filled with vintage American cars; lively musicians and dancers; and al fresco dining outside picturesque spots like the historic San Cristobal Cathedral.

With the door to Cuba on the verge of opening to American tourists and investment, there may not be much time left to see the island before it inevitably changes. For now, it's still possible to watch farmers plow their fields with yoked oxen, talk to a cabby about how he keeps his classic American car running smoothly, and discover socialist propaganda on roadside billboards. For these and more authentic Cuban experiences, read on.

### Discover Cuba's capital

Say *hola* to Havana with a ride along the city's famed **Malecón** boardwalk in a vintage car that may be older than you are. Sure, it's almost a cliché, but these cars are for real and so are their owners, like Sergio Nieto. He and two friends paid 25,000 CUC (about \$33,000) three years ago for their pink and white 1953 Ford Victory with an image of Fidel Castro, the country's iconic leader for almost a half-century, on the driver's door, and co-revolutionary Che Guevara on the passenger side. While Nieto drives you along the seawall, honking his horn and running the occasional red light, you'll see Havana in all its gritty glory while learning what it's been like for Cubans to live under the thumb of Castro for so long. Take in historic Revolution Square, the White House-lookalike El Capitolio, and the vibrant Vedado neighbourhood.



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As the sun sets over the Straits of Florida, explore the narrow streets of *Habana Vieja* (Old Havana) on foot. Enjoy a daiquiri at the **El Floridita** ([floridita-cuba.com](http://floridita-cuba.com)), one of Ernest Hemingway's famous hangouts, and visit Room 511 at the nearby **Hotel Ambos Mundos** ([hotelambosmundos.info](http://hotelambosmundos.info)), where the legendary author lived and wrote in the 1930s. Sip a sweet Cuban espresso while watching cigars being rolled at the 18th-century **Hotel Conde de Villanueva** ([hotelcondedevillanueva.com](http://hotelcondedevillanueva.com)).

### Learn to salsa in Santiago de Cuba

At the other end of the island, Cuba's second-largest city and colonial capital moves to a distinctly Afro-Cuban beat known as *son*, the mother of salsa. It's said that salsa is a way of life in Cuba and nowhere is that more true than in Santiago. If you happen to be circumnavigating the island with **Cuba Cruise by Celestial Cruises** ([yourcubacruise.com](http://yourcubacruise.com)) – a Canadian cruise company offering a handy way to see a lot of the island in one week – sign up for the two-hour salsa and rumba lesson at Rhythm Cuba when docked in Santiago. On-board Cuban dance instructor Martha Lahens gives this

advice: “Don't worry about the steps. If you can follow the beat, the rest is easy.”

But there's more to Santiago than salsa. When you're done dancing, take in the rich history of this city, such as the Spanish fortress **El Morro**, now a UNESCO World Heritage site ([whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org)), and the **Santa Ifigenia Cemetery** where some of the country's most influential figures are buried.

### Get closer to Castro in Biran

From the port city of Antilla in eastern Cuba, it's just over an hour's drive to the tiny town of **Biran**, where Fidel Castro and his six siblings were born. In that hour, you'll see sights you'd never expect: maybe a man walking a pig on a rope like a dog – the cheapest way to feed animals is to let them graze along the roadside. You'll certainly see horse-drawn buggies carrying people and supplies, and oxen pulling plows in the fields.

Approaching Biran, look for the enormous billboard with jovial photos of Fidel and his beardless brother Raúl – president since 2008. Their childhood

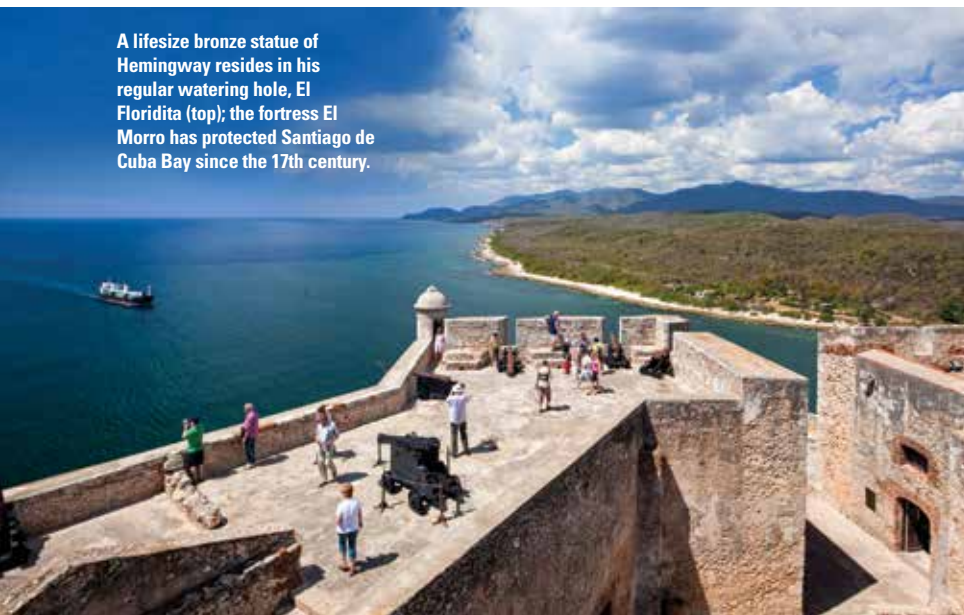
home is now a museum, but with proud portraits gracing the walls and clothes hanging in the closets, you might think the family is just out for the day. Bottles of perfume and a rosary adorn the dresser in their mother's bedroom. Angel Castro, the family patriarch, was a successful sugarcane farmer and entrepreneur who built a general store, post office, school and cockfighting ring on his property. Of course, it was nationalized along with other businesses when Fidel and his co-revolutionaries seized power in 1959.

### Get wet and wild at El Nicho

Who knew that Cuba boasts wilderness parks as well as pristine beaches? High up in the Escambray Mountains – where opponents of Castro hid out during the revolution – **El Nicho Park** offers a welcome respite from the heat and humidity lower down. Its undeveloped loveliness is a surprise for a country that was colonized almost 500 years ago. But the best part about El Nicho is its series of waterfalls, each one more impressive than the last. Green and turquoise pools gather at the bases, inviting you to slip in and cool off.

One final experience you need to have in Cuba is dining at a state-owned restaurant, not for the pleasure, but for the adventure. While privately owned restaurants have started to open with Raúl Castro's economic reforms, dining *à la state* (such as at the restaurant in El Nicho) lets you in on how Cubans themselves eat – basic fare that's heavy on the proteins (often fried pork or chicken) with few vegetables. And it makes you realize that some of the inevitable changes coming once Cuba opens its doors to U.S. businesses just may be for the better, for Cubans and visitors alike. ■

A lifesize bronze statue of Hemingway resides in his regular watering hole, El Floridita (top); the fortress El Morro has protected Santiago de Cuba Bay since the 17th century.



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