



A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH: HAVANA

Words by Hannah Brandler

"Cuba is our people."

From chef Rodolfo's countryside haven to the graceful Acosta Danza ballet company, our local guide's words rang true with each encounter. Cuba is an island whose culture is entrancing, hypnotic and certainly unique, but Havana in particular holds the arts in the highest regard, forging a capital city with creativity on every corner. We took to the streets of Cuba's iconic capital, under the wing of legendary rum masters Havana Club, for a local perspective on Havana's spoils.

With a rich history, and a very recent one at that, visitors are still able to witness Havana's restoration at work. Since it was labelled a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, the City Historian Office has been dedicated to sprucing up the surrounds, repairing the pothole-ridden streets and providing outdoor green spaces. Havana's image is certainly undergoing a transformation, but the murals of Plaza Vieja provide a constant reminder of Fidel Castro's revolution.



FÁBRICA DE ARTE CUBANO BY CALEB KRIVOSHEY

Stay

Holing up in a *casa particular*, or home-stay, is the most authentic way to experience Havana. You might be lucky and get a roof terrace, fitted with quaint patio furniture and hanging pot plants, or make a long-time friend in the owner. Do not expect a guarantee of hot showers or the internet, but take it in your stride and immerse yourself in this time-warped city. While we initially dreaded the thought of a WiFi-less week, living a life away from today's tech-centric world was a real bonus.

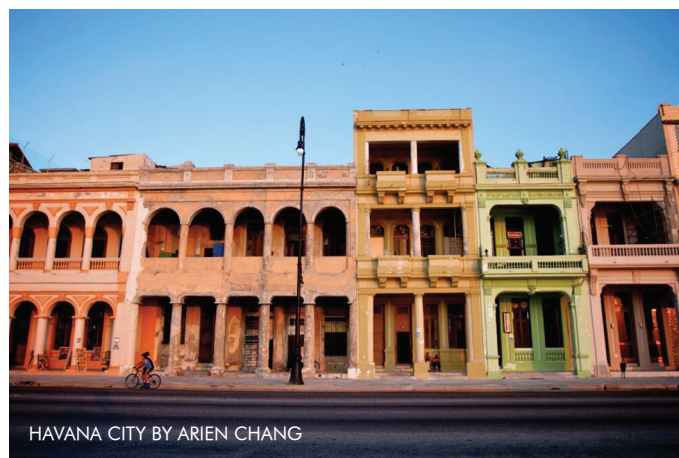
If basic isn't really for you, the picturesque sea-view Hotel Nacional de Cuba is perfect for a more luxurious stay. With the Santa Clara Battery guns on display in the garden, this World Heritage Site will also give you an insight into Cuba's past.

See and Do

Cruising around Old Havana in a classic open-top convertible—a bright yellow 1957 Dodge to be exact—is a stylish way to sightsee. Experience the city's architectural contrasts, with the grand Capitol on one side and neglected narrow houses on the other; even the coach and horses don't seem out of place. The film-set like plazas and dilapidated buildings will have you pitching the location for the next Bond film, with James switching up a vodka martini for a classic Cuba Libre after a pursuit on Havana's

rickety rooftops. After all, the upcoming *Fast and Furious* was filmed along the bustling seaside promenade: the Malecón.

The driver's rhythmic beeping and Latin soundtrack will put anyone in the mood to explore Havana's buzzing music scene, whether that be the widely recognised Buena Vista Social Club or the harmonic melodies of street-performers. Keep an eye out for Daymé Arocena, the charismatic



HAVANA CITY BY ARIEN CHANG



Cuban singer with an infectious *joie de vivre*. Supported by Havana Cultura and signed to Gilles Peterson's record label Brownswood Recordings, Daymé will be touring Europe in 2017 with her latest album *Cubafonía*.

Take a trip to the Havana Club Museum of Rum, housed in a restored eighteenth century colonial townhouse, and soak up the history behind Cuba's premium rum via a guided tour, culminating in a much-desired trip to the bar and boutique. Havana Club is not just any spirit brand but one that is immensely proud of its strong Cuban roots; the whole rum-making process takes place in Cuba using home-grown ingredients. Its global platform, Havana Cultura, supports creativity in all its forms and exports Cuban culture to the wider world. The Elliott Erwitt Havana Club 7 Fellowship is just one example of this, continuing Erwitt's legacy by providing a world-class photographer with the opportunity to travel to Cuba and create a series of photos capturing its essence. The finished product will be exhibited in the gallery within the Rum Museum.

The highlight of the art scene is the Fábrica de Arte Cubano, a revamped olive oil factory, home to a vibrant bar and club that lives up to its slogan '*todas las artes en el mismo espacio*' (all art forms in the same space). The maze-like venue accommodates a range of ages and has something for everyone. From a cinema-style room with art exhibited on every surface to live music stages and alcoves selling handmade jewellery, getting lost has never been so eventful.

At the other end of the spectrum lies a more discreet private art gallery, the first of its kind in Havana, owned by Cuban actor Jorge Perugorria: Galeria Taller Gorria. With a collectors' scene starting to emerge on the island, the contemporary gallery is intending to take part in international art fairs whilst also keeping to its roots by involving the community through its workshops. Taller Gorria is thriving in a much-improved neighbourhood that only a few years back was a red-light district.

The Acosta Danza company, whose Havana-born founder Carlos Acosta is internationally renowned for his spellbinding participation in The Royal Ballet of London, is an incredible opportunity to see world-class talent first-hand. The fusion of ballet and contemporary dance is made to look effortless. Get into the Cuban spirit and book tickets for the English leg of their tour in October 2017.

Food and Drinks

Foodies will rejoice at the newfound food scene in Cuba, an island that has been criticised in the past for their largely state-owned cuisine. With the 2011 change in legislation permitting the expansion of *paladares* (private restaurants), Havana is experiencing a true culinary revolution. Cuban cuisine remains straightforward with pork, lobster and the ubiquitous *ropa vieja* (shredded beef) popping up on every menu, but the flavours do not disappoint. Greens might be hard to come by but you'll be glad to be away from the kale



VISTAMAR BY ARIEN CHANG

craze, especially when presented with our new favourite snack –tempting plantain chips, served alongside *moros y cristianos* (black beans and rice).

La Guarida was the most inventive of all, a sure winner in both the quality of food and unforgettable setting. This *paladar* lies in a decaying mansion, seemingly ready to crumble at any minute. We started our evening with the top three cocktails from the 2014 Havana Club International Cocktail Grand Prix at the rooftop-bar: our favourite, *La Mansión*, was reminiscent of a traditional mojito but enhanced with peach marmalade. This twice-yearly contest asks renowned bartenders to create a concoction using only Cuban ingredients. After drooling over the dishes arriving at the elegant terraced restaurant below, we made our way to our table. The food lives up to the hype with luxurious appetisers of marlin tacos, mains of juicy lobster on a bed of creamy risotto and a fittingly petite chocolate pudding and deconstructed lemon meringue pie to top it all off. Make sure to finish off dinner the Cuban way with a *sobremesa*: Havana Club *Añejo 7 Años* in one hand and a *Cohibo* cigar in the other.

For a totally different backdrop but an equally picturesque venue, head to the sea-view restaurant Vistamar: a 1949 house turned outstanding *paladar*. Overlooking an immaculate pool pouring into the ocean beyond, it's hard not to compare it to the state-owned drained and deserted pools next door. Order the speciality of the house, an envy-inducing and generous seafood plate.

We were lucky enough to get a feast in the Cuban countryside at Rodolfo's jungle-like clearing, just minutes from Havana Club's San José de Las Lajas Distillery. In a barely-there shack, Rodolfo cooks up traditional Cuban cuisine for the distillery personnel. We relished the barbecued suckling pig, a Jéroboam-sized bottle of refreshing pineapple

juice and a platter of the Cuban root-vegetable-speciality, *yuca*. And all of this at a table fashioned from recycled construction materials, shaded under a canopy of mango and coconut trees.

Havana and rum go hand in hand and you can't get more lavish than the Havana Club *Iconica* collection, consisting of five deluxe extra-aged rums. Our recommendation would be the rich yet delicate *Máximo Extra Añejo*, an amber-tinted rum crafted from the blending of the oldest reserves in Havana Club's cellars. Encased in hand-blown crystal decanters, the opulent packaging says it all and only one thousand bottles are produced each year. *The Maestros Roneros* (masters of rum), led by the god-like figure Don José Navarro, are experts in the art of rum making, with at least fifteen years training under their belts and a flair for precision. They preside over every step of the complex creation process, whether that be the distillation, ageing or blending stages. The tasting notes act only as an introduction. The true flavours, as we are told by rum master Manuel Calderón, depend on each person's background and culture.

Steer clear of the highly raved about El Floridita, which resembles a tourist trap with crowds of visitors pinning to grab the Hemingway-famous daiquiri. Instead, head to the hidden-away Café Madrigal, the vibrant tapas bar with a creative cocktail list to get you merry.

In a Nutshell

Behind Havana's ramshackle exterior lies unexpected luxury. It's safe to say that anywhere else is incomparable to this historic island. We left with a bottle of the essential Havana Club 3 Años and an infinite thirst to return.

havana-cultura.com
havana-club.com



VIEW FROM LA GUARIDA BY CALEB KRIVOSHEY