

# Forbidden Fruit

Cuba, long off-limits, opens to Americans

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES AND MARY LOVE

In the twilight, our taxi pulled up to an old, white mansion in Centro Havana. Adorned with ornate moldings and weighty balustrades, it whispered “faded glory.” This was La Guarida (Spanish for “the lair”), arguably the most famous of Havana’s new breed of small, privately owned restaurants or *paladares*.

A hefty man opened the cab’s door. “Buenos noches,” he said. Then, detecting we were English speakers, he asked, “From where do you come?”

“Estados Unidos,” we replied. “Welcome! Did you know Beyoncé and Jay-Z were here last month?”

We knew. In fact, it was big news in the United States at the time, with several members of Congress denouncing the couple’s visit to Cuba as a thinly disguised tourist trip, violating U.S. restrictions on tourism.

But Beyoncé and Jay-Z had come to Cuba legally, as we had, under a U.S. government-sanctioned program that allows licensed travel companies and select institutions (museums, universities and other nonprofits) to offer “people-to-people” trips with educational and cultural itineraries.

We stepped through a small carriageway and up two flights of curving marble stairs. The first landing opened onto a grand, marble-tiled room, divided by a row of freestanding Corinthian columns.

Up the next flight, past a headless marble statue, was La Guarida and its three small candlelit rooms. Large mirrors and photos of celebrity clientele competed for space on

the walls. Diners, mostly Spanish speaking, were engaged in lively conversation.

Despite its grand architecture, the restaurant’s furnishings looked as if they’d been gathered on sporadic visits to an antiques mall. Every chair was different. No glass or plate matched. Yet, somehow, it all hung together. And the meal? Let’s just say it was clear why many people say that the best cuisine in Cuba is in her *paladares*.

Over the next seven days, our trip adhered to U.S. government requirements that the focus be on “educational exchange activities” that result in “purposeful travel.” Five days in Havana and two in Trinidad, a beautiful, UNESCO World Heritage site, allowed us to explore both these cities and the countryside in between. Although these



Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage site.



1. A vegetable cart in Old Havana. 2. *Rejas* (ornate window grills) and a *postigo* (a door-within-a-door) in Trinidad’s colonial-era center. 3. A wall mural with the ubiquitous image of Che Guevara. 4. A dancer in the Parisien Cabaret in Havana’s Hotel Nacional de Cuba. 5. A 1950s-era American car. 6. Dining al fresco at Doña Eutemia, a *paladar* in Old Havana.





trips have strict itineraries with limited flexibility, participants find them enjoyable and often make repeat visits.

The growing interest in visiting Cuba has partly to do with its “forbidden fruit” status. Shut out for many years, Americans are now seizing any opportunity to see Castro-era Cuba before it changes. As one of our travel companions confessed, “I just wanted to see Havana before it becomes another Miami Beach!”

Visiting Cuba, after all, is a nostalgia trip. High rises are mostly absent from skylines. McDonald’s and mega chain stores haven’t invaded. Billboards are few. And 1950s-era American cars—not collectibles, but functional family vehicles and taxis—cruise the streets.

But it’s Cuba’s welcoming people who are the biggest attraction. As British-born novelist and longtime Havana visitor Pico Ayer wrote, “I couldn’t resist the effervescence, the beauty, the spirited sophistication of the place...the people I met could hardly have

been more sparkling.”

What’s most surprising about Cuba? Although the country is poor by international standards, there’s little to no begging in the streets. The friendly atmosphere in urban areas, by day and night, made us feel as safe, or safer, than in many U.S. cities. Everything from hotel rooms to public restrooms was remarkably clean. And the presence of some four- and five-star hotels ensured we’d have comfortable accommodations.

Our days were chock full of pre-planned activities: walks to view architecture and street life, performing arts demonstrations, gallery visits, an organic farm tour and more. Free time before and after dinner allowed us to explore on our own—or simply relax.

The Old City of Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is built around several plazas, most bordered with colonial-era buildings, churches, former palaces and sidewalk cafes. It features one of the largest

concentrations of Spanish colonial architecture in the New World, plus styles ranging from Baroque to contemporary.

A highlight on the waterfront is the Castillo de la Real Fuerza. Built between 1558 and 1577, it was the first Spanish fortress built in the New World. The fortress overlooks the Malecón, Havana’s popular waterfront promenade and social venue, dubbed the “world’s longest couch.” Throughout the day and night, lovers stroll or entwine on perches along the sea wall, revelers perform, fishermen cast lines into the sea and boys dive off large boulders into the sea.

But no architectural tour of Cuba is complete without visiting the town of Trinidad. Founded in 1514, it’s the third oldest settlement in the country,

A grand church and 18th- and 19th-century pastel-colored houses border Plaza Mayor, Trinidad’s main square. Narrow cobblestone streets lead to shops, art galleries and private residences—some preserved

as museums. Ordinary folks occupy many of these old buildings, which have large central courtyards and Moorish tiles. They sell *pina coladas* from their windows or invite passers-by inside to dine at their *paladares*.

Arguably no other country its size is as well endowed musically as Cuba. As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Eugene Robinson has written, “Through all Cuba’s bipolar, historical lurches, two things have been constant: music and dance. From decade to decade, Cuba has been a land of music and Cubans have danced as if their lives depended on it.”

The country’s musical heritage is a potpourri of influences, including African, Spanish, French and Haitian. Its daily presence in people’s lives is evident. From street corners, dance halls and cabaret shows (such as those at the Tropicana and Hotel Nacional) to all-night clubs like the Casa de la Musica, tourists dance with the local crowds.

We visited *Prodanza*, the ballet school di-

rected by Laura Alonzo, daughter of Cuba’s most famous ballerina, Alicia Alonzo, who with her husband, Fernando, founded in 1948 the predecessor of the renowned Ballet Nacional de Cuba. Laura coached a pair of dancers through a sensuous pas de deux on an outdoor stage. Afterward, she explained with pride that her graduates have gone on to perform with top companies around the world.

An organic farm cooperative on our itinerary, just east of Havana, was similar, we were told, to others around Cuba. Such farms were born of necessity in the 1990s by starving Cubans after the Soviets abandoned the country and stopped financing equipment and fertilizers. Today, these farms are models of sustainable agriculture.

Upon inquiring about a solar oven near the fields, we learned that developing renewable energy is a priority in Cuba. Our guide added that Cuba is currently building a large, solar energy complex to help reduce dependence on imported oil.

Despite poverty, dependence on food and oil imports, and the U.S. trade embargo, Cuba moves forward. Education is free through college, and medical services are good.

An increase in private enterprise (Cubans can now own businesses as well as buy and sell homes, autos and electronic consumer products), a thriving tourism industry, exports of nickel, and doctors who practice worldwide—all result in much-needed revenues. Financial remittances from Cubans living abroad also help to prop up the economy.

People-to-people cultural tours, approved by the U.S. government, are growing in popularity among Americans. Whatever one’s opinion of the Castro regime, it’s undeniable that educational travel to Cuba can foster mutual understanding and goodwill.

For more information, view our accompanying video on [charlestonstyleanddesign.com/category/travel](http://charlestonstyleanddesign.com/category/travel). ➤



  
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