Will Cuba Remain Frozen in Time?

CLASSIC CARS, COLONIAL STREETS AND A REVOLUTION PAUSED IN TIME

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORY
a realm of contradictions

CLASSIC CARS OF THE FIFTIES
a red Chevrolet taxi

OLD HAVANA PRESERVED
colonial streets restored

THE ADONIA DOCKS IN HAVANA
700 passengers from Miami

A SECOND LOOK AT HAVANA

Will Cuba Remain Frozen in Time?

a country suspended between its revolution and the rush of tourism

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia | CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

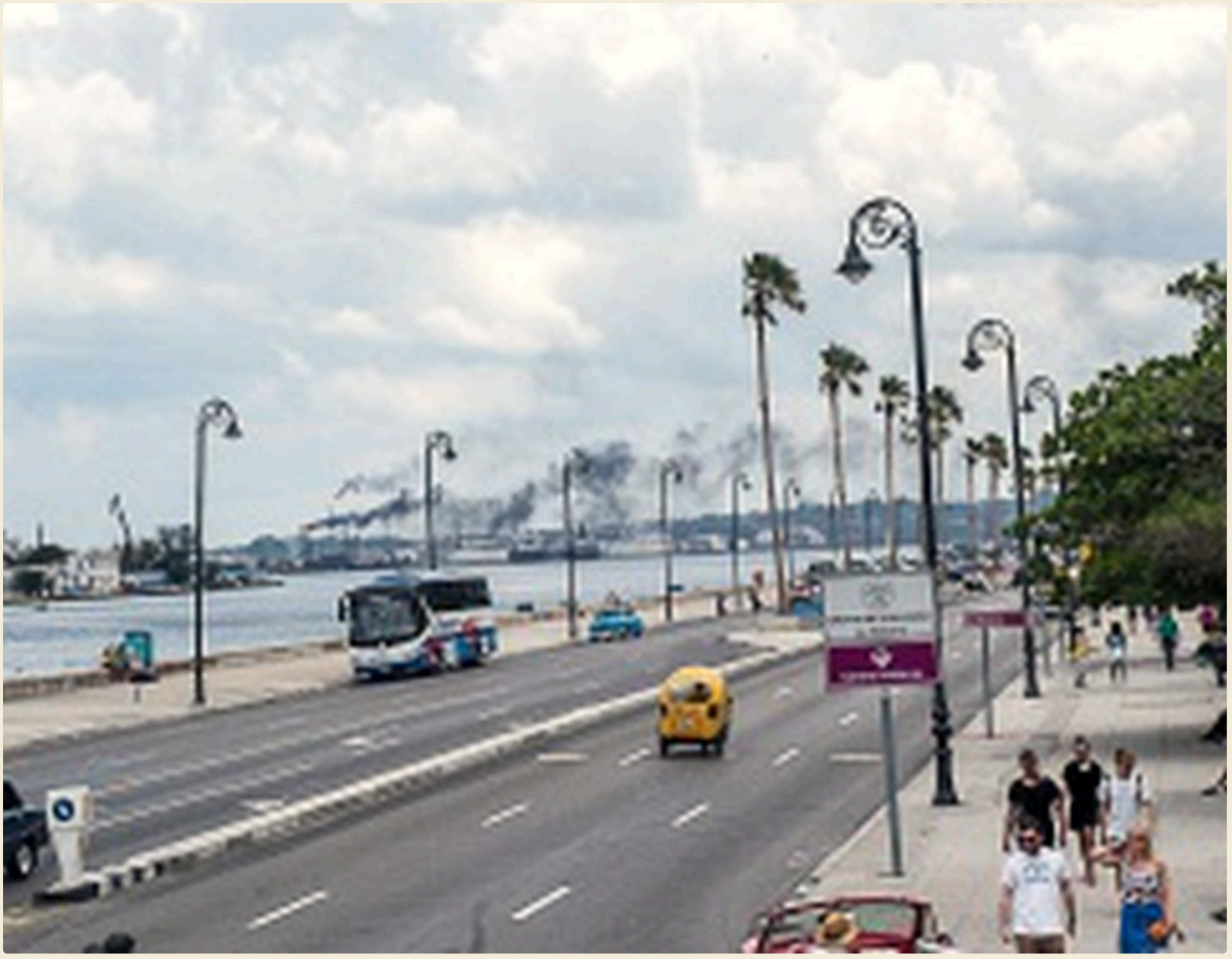


Havana is one of those rare destinations on our planet which peculiarly attracts visitors of all different types and tastes from all over the globe. The warmth, antiquity and charming architectural character of a city with only five hundred years of known history invites curious tourists to the distinctive realm of diversity and contradictions.

On my second visit to Havana, I am in search of responses to some of the questions and thoughts which have engaged my head since my last visit to Cuba in 2015. I am contemplating the delight of the American classic cars, Cuban cigars or the drumming of Afro-Caribbean music. Cuba is still a country frozen in time.

I

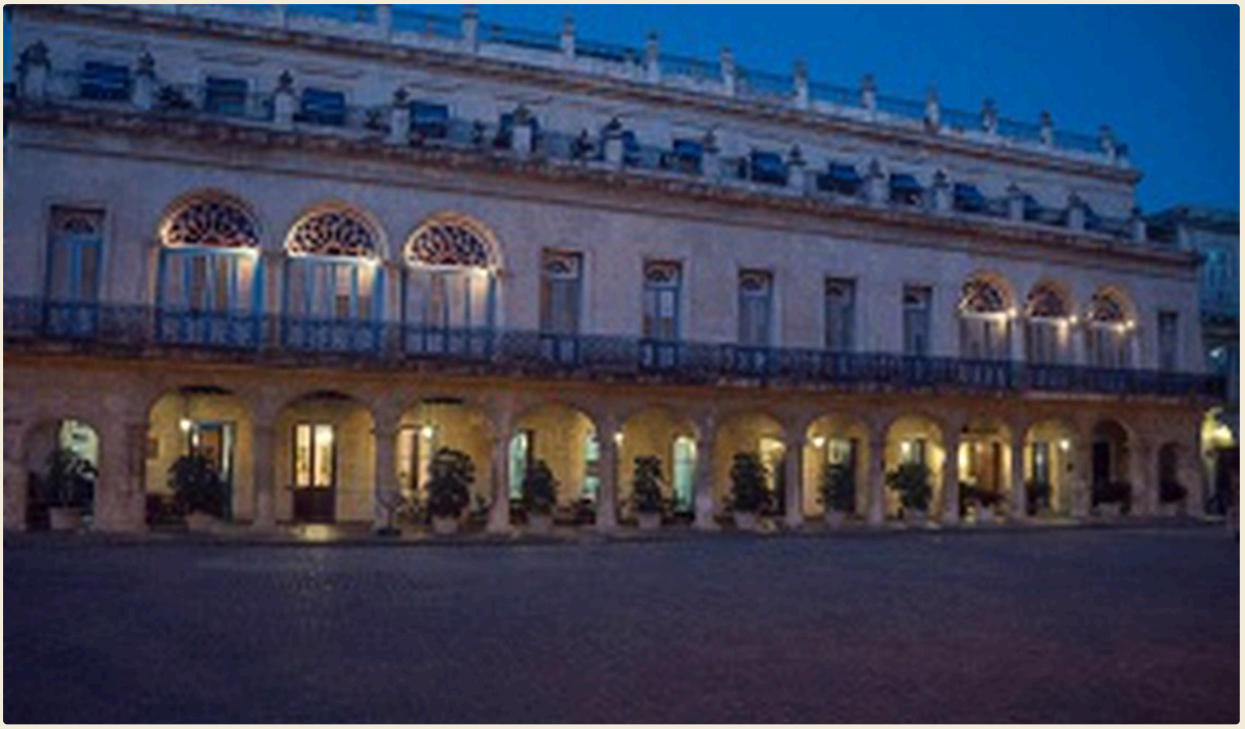
DRIVING DOWN THE MALECON



the rocky coastline road of Malecon

Cuba is a nation with a spirit of survival that arose from the days of slavery under Spanish colonial oppression. The legacy of Jose Marti, the Havana born, nineteenth century revolutionary theorist and national hero, hangs high over the life of ordinary Cubans. His heroism was inherited by a new generation of activists led by Fidel Castro who picked up the flag of social reform in the 1950's.

In the last decade the country has been under enormous pressures. Cuba has been forced to adapt to inevitable changes in order to overcome poverty and the economic crisis caused by imposed sanctions since the revolution. The situation became worse and new challenges arose following the collapse of the Soviet Union which had economically supported Cuba but the country continued to stand on the principles and socialist values of the revolution.



Palacio de los Condes de Santovenia in the Plaza de Armas at night

The government currently provides free education and healthcare to its people. However the way of life and the Cuba of today is threatened by the return of capitalism in the form of foreign investments and the inevitable changes that will come from an anticipated huge leap in tourism numbers. The people and places which are directly involved with tourists such as taxi drivers, restaurants and hotels will benefit from the stream of dollars flooding the Cuban market, but will those benefits extend to ordinary Cubans?

Inevitably, despite the booming tourism and overall economic boost, the social balance is in jeopardy. The gap between rich and poor is increasing. The Cuban economy, which has limited resources in sugar plantations, tobacco and biotechnology, does not have any other option but to rely on tourism and consequently foreign investments to improve its infrastructure.

Despite the government's widespread efforts to renovate the neglected buildings in the old city, the restoration process of a large number of decayed structures is not happening quickly enough due to a lack of funding. The state of residential and commercial buildings in old Havana is something that cannot be hidden from the eyes of travellers who are rushing to see Cuba before dramatic changes take place. There are concerns that the sudden transformations and cultural invasion by foreigners may disturb Cuba's originality. Not so says the Minister of Tourism – Manuel Marrero Cruz – and he has promised 100% authenticity.

II

A METROPOLIS OF FIVE CENTURIES



my bright red and very shiny taxi. Will modern cars replace these as Cuba's economy expands from the additional tourists?

I started my journey from a hotel in the upscale Miramar area of Havana which is where most embassies are located. The taxi took me through the very wide leafy boulevard of 5ta Avenida before continuing along the rocky coastline road of Malecon where we were battered by high winds. As we got closer to old Havana, I found myself in an extraordinary cosmopolitan metropolis of colonial style buildings with stone facades dating from the 16th and 17th centuries. It reminded me of older parts of Spanish cities such as Madrid and Valencia. I could see the combined Spanish, Moorish and baroque styles all mixed together and erupting in the design of residential buildings. Although it is evident that there is European inspiration in the planning of the city's architecture, the use of local materials, the Caribbean climate and native cultural influences has certainly created a thrilling and distinct urban environment which has been uniformly shaped in the last five centuries.

Unlike other communist states that normally used to employ sombre and grey colours, Havana is embellished by a variety of more cheerful shades arising from its tropical architecture. The energetic colours of blue, green, yellow and pink dominate the city's landscapes. What I see is a country that has emerged from an amalgamation of many cultures and traditions born of various races throughout its history. The cheerful architecture of Havana is the reflection of that.

III

THE CASTILLO DE LA REAL FUERZA



the entrance to the Castillo de la Real Fuerza

Cuba is known for its fifties, classically styled taxis and mine was no exception. It was a red Chevrolet, beautifully chromed and polished, and it dropped me outside the stony fort of the Castillo de la Real Fuerza by the bay opposite the Plaza de Armas. This small sixteenth century stronghold was built to defend the city against pirates and invaders, and is believed to be the oldest fort in America. "Protecting" the castle are several cannons which you pass before entering the castle by crossing a movable bridge built over an extraordinary ditch.

The dark-grey fort currently houses the Navigation Museum containing models of ships and naval equipment. There is also a model of the fort on display with information about its history. One thing visitors must do is to venture on to the roof and this is done via a narrow stepping-stone. Why is this a must? Because from the roof you have a great view of the bay and, in the distance, Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña on the banks of the Canal de Entrada. You can also see the plaza and some of the city's landmarks. The entrance fee is only 3 CUC (Cuban Convertible Pesos) – about £2.27 – and all information is in Spanish.

IV

THE PLAZA DE ARMAS

I stepped into the historic Plaza de Armas, one of the biggest plazas in Havana, where the early settlers began the foundation of the city in the early 16th century. In the middle of the picturesque square is a park filled with the leafy palm trees and, in its centre, a statue of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the national hero who led Cuba to independence in the 19th century. The plaza is surrounded by several colonial buildings built of yellowish limestone, such as Palacio de los Condes de Santovenia which has been converted into the luxurious 27-room Hotel Santa Isabel. It is impressively decorated with many delicate columns and arches. In one side of the square, there are cafes and restaurants and a daily secondhand book market where you can find used posters and books about Che Guevara and Castro. There was also a man selling antiques and used Russian cameras.

On the far side of the square stands the 18th century Palacio de los Capitanes Generales built in 1792 and which used to be the headquarters of the Spanish conquistadors in Central America until 1898. Subsequently, this two story building with baroque style arcades was used by the US military in the nineteenth century, then it became the house of the Cuban president until 1920, and finally it housed the city hall until 1967. Today, this historic palace houses the City Museum (Museo de la Ciudad), one of the best museums – in my opinion – in Havana. The impressive cream stone façade of the building stands on very dense curved pillars, featuring long terraces across colourful glass windows.



statue of Christopher Columbus in the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales

V

INSIDE THE CITY MUSEUM

I paid the entrance fee of 3 CUC and entered into a green rectangular courtyard which houses a white marble statue of Christopher Columbus. It is surrounded by arched arcades and balconies in the four corners all constructed on heavy limestone columns. The museum displays historical and antique exhibits including several horse carriages, military uniforms, swords, guns, cannons, other types of weaponry and artwork. Some rooms were set up with original furniture and beautiful portraits of important Cuban figures as well as one large painting depicting the story of the revolution. One of the main halls on the second floor was decorated with large mirrors, chandeliers, antiques and luxury furniture.



a bici taxi

VI

CALLE OBISPO

I continued my journey in the old town walking through vibrant Calle Obispo, one of the busiest streets in Havana. It is the main hub of the city where street performers gather to entertain tourists. Men with Cuban cigars invite you to take a picture with them. Jazz blares from cafes and bars whilst the many galleries will sell you paintings. If you get tired, you can take a Bici Taxi (a three-wheel bicycle taxi) to take you around town. As I walked further down the street, I was amazed at how the original colonial features have been preserved. I could see evident changes and further restorations throughout the city since my last visit in 2015.



vibrant Calle Obispo, one of the busiest streets in Havana

VII

SIGNS OF A BRIGHTER FUTURE



the Adonia – the first cruise ship of many that will dock in Cuba

There are many signs of a brighter future for Cuban tourism. It is a place everybody would like to taste before the country unfreezes. Havana welcomed the Adonia, the first American cruise ship after over 50 years in May, carrying 700 passengers from Miami. Western celebrities are raising the profile of the city, as evident when I saw the Fast & Furious movie crew in Melia Hotel. They were filming some of the scenes for the latest installment Fast 8 in the country making it the first overseas feature film to be shot in Cuba for decades. I also saw the Kardashians, by chance, in one of the museums strolling around and heavily protected by security guards.

I strongly recommend a visit to this incredible island to experience the unique and joyful culture rooted in tradition just in case the changes coming remove the Cuba I have grown to adore.

For more about Cuba, click here.

It is a place everybody would like to taste before the country unfreezes.

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

For more of Reza's images of Cuba, go to www.purevisionjourneys.com/cuba

Images and story © Mohammed Reza Amirinia.

Discover more at www.amirinia.com

AMIRINIA.COM