Old Havana

CIGARS, JAZZ AND COLONIAL CHARM

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



PARQUE CENTRAL	THE GRAND THEATRE	CALLE OBISPO	PLAZA DE ARMAS
The old city walls	*Opened 1915*	*Nearly 500 years old*	*The city museum*

MY FAVOURITE CITY IN THE CARIBBEAN

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In the centre of the Parque Central is the statue of José Martí

The Cuban capital, Havana is on most people's bucket lists because it is an authentic and charming city. I have returned to Havana, my favourite city in the Caribbean, for my third visit. One of the unique selling points of Havana is that it is different from other tourist cities in the world. Cuban cigars still reign supreme, the intoxicating sound of jazz reverberates in the streets and the revolutionary slogans on the walls and portraits of Che Guevara remain to watch over the city.

This combination of artistic image, colonial architecture and Caribbean buzz are significant ingredients that go towards uplifting the spirit of the city and making it a magnet for visitors. At a place where once stood the city walls is the central park (Parque Central) at the edge of old Havana. (La Habana Vieja.) In the centre of the Parque Central is the statue of José Martí, a national hero and the symbol of Cuban Independence. The 28 palm trees surrounding the monument mark the birth date of José Martí whose influence through his poems, philosophy and political theories is still an inspiration to Cubans.

I

AN OPEN MUSEUM OF CULTURE AND ARCHITECTURE



It is surrounded by the Great Theatre of Habana (the Gran Teatro de La Habana opened 1915)

But Parque Central is more than a geographical location. Located between old Havana and Centro Havana, it is an open museum of culture and architecture. It is surrounded by the Great Theatre of Habana (the Gran Teatro de La Habana opened 1915) and several old nineteenth century hotels such as the Inglatera (1875), Plaza (1895) and Telegraph (1888). In June this year a new arrival was added to this old world charm. The luxury, five star Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana is about as different from existing hotels as it is possible to be. For the first time a European style luxury shopping arcade has been built below the hotel showcasing brand designer outlets. Is this a sign of how Cuba will become now that friendlier relations with the west are coming about?

Now that the government has opened the country's doors to foreign investment and encouraged tourism to help grow the economy some of the ideas of José Martí are coming to pass.

From Parque Central, the vibrant hub of the city, you can reach other city attractions through a mesh of parallel streets. There is a bus stop opposite the Inglatera Hotel where you can catch the hop-on hop-off tourist buses, (one of the best forms of transport to get around the city) and also have a guided tour. Costing just 10 CUC for a day it is great value. But many are drawn to the American classic cars that double as taxis and to offer tours around the city. They cost more than the buses as do the horse-drawn carriages that you will see but this is the charm of the city and one of the features that tourists recognised. But the best way to explore Havana is on foot. If you want to avoid walking and don't fancy the hop-on, hop-off bus, you can always try a three-wheel, bicycle taxi to get around.

II

THE NATIONAL CAPITOL



the National Capitol, a magnificent building built in 1926

Opposite the Gran Teatro and adjacent to the central park is the National Capitol, a magnificent building built in 1926, which looks like America's Capitol building (the House of Congress). It will surprise few to know that this building was the seat of the Government until 1959.

But don't just stay on the ground in Parque Central. To get a panoramic view of the city, go to the roof terraces of any of the hotels there. Order a drink in the evening, listen to the jazz, enjoy the gossip of locals and other visitors and watch the lights of the city as another day ends.

In the morning, I strolled to the old city, which has seen significant change since my last visit. More buildings have been restored; the streets look cleaner, greener and are decorated by colourful floral displays. There is an energy now and you can still feel the warmth and friendliness in the cheerful faces of the inhabitants.

I have walked through Calle Obispo in the heart of old town many times before. But it is always pleasant because every time I see it differently and discover new things. Calle Obispo (Bishop Street) is nearly 500 years old and extends from Avenida Bélgica behind Parque Central to Plaza de Armas near the bay and is the longest pedestrianised street in Old Havana.

III

CALLE OBISPO



Calle Obispo is the most popular and the busiest street in old Havana

Calle Obispo is the most popular and the busiest street in old Havana, an ideal place to absorb the atmosphere of the city. Here you will find a mix of locals and tourists as they saunter into shops, galleries, book stores, handicraft stalls, hotels, restaurants and bars.

Havana is the safest city in the world, but like many other capital cities it suffers from hustlers. Don't be too annoyed by this hard sell and persistent group who actively try to trade things with you in Obispo. They are an inevitable part of the city's economy but, hopefully, they will slowly disappear as Havana revamps its image as a fast-changing city.

At the junction of Aguacate Street and Obispo, there is a little park, where people take a breather and watch the world go by. Some people look jobless and some of them have their lunch breaks. I saw a familiar face among them, the same person I have seen on my previous trips. He greeted me and I took his picture again. He is very photogenic and that could be why he demands 1 CUC for each picture. But this time it was different as we had become friends and he allowed me to take his pictures without a fee. But I paid him anyway.

Buildings in Obispo are an eye-watering combination of styles. There is Moorish and Spanish architecture but overlaid with striking and bright Caribbean colours. Other buildings are in the Baroque style and remind me of Europe. One of these exceptional architectural examples is the Cuban Ministry of Finance on the corner of Cuba Street in the banking district.

IV

A MEMORY OF A BYGONE AGE



From top to bottom it is covered with mahogany shelves

For a shop that is a memory of a bygone age, visit one of the oldest pharmacies in Havana, Farmacia Taquechel, which was built in 1898. The pharmacy sells organic products plus modern drugs as well as acting as a museum. Displays of antique apothecary jars, instruments, pots, a water filter and a solar microscope are among the exhibits. You can also visit another old pharmacy, the Farmacia Drogueria Johnson built in 1914 and located in Calle Obispo. From top to bottom it is covered with mahogany shelves.

Further down the street is Universidad de San Jeronimo or the University of Havana which was built in 1728. On previous visits I had seen students with their laptops and smart phones working away as this was an internet hot spot. Now that wifi is more available and the signals are stronger, the place was less busy.

Opposite the University on the corner of Mercadere Street is the Ambos Mundos Hotel, built in 1924, and a tourist attraction because this is where the American writer, Ernest Hemingway, used to base himself in the 1930's.

V

PLAZA DE ARMAS



The beautiful columns and arches in yellowish stone are a reminder of Cuba's colonial past

After a long but pleasant walk, I reached Plaza de Armas. The square is dominated by the eighteenth century Palacio de los Capitanes Generales. (Palace of the Captain Generals.) The building, which used to be a political powerhouse during the rule of the Spanish and the Americans was once the house of Cuban presidents. Then it became the city hall but, today, it is the location of the city museum. Several other impressive colonial buildings surround the plaza. The beautiful columns and arches in yellowish stone are a reminder of Cuba's colonial past. The secondhand book and antique market in the Plaza, which I saw last year, has disappeared. Is this going to be symptomatic of changing Havana?

In a city that is changing quickly I have just provided a glimpse of old Havana through my eyes. There are many more hidden gems and interesting stories of people still to be discovered in old Havana's alleyways, courtyards and plazas.

I'll never turn down the opportunity to return to Havana to explore further beneath the skin of this fascinating city.

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

The hop-on, hop-off tourist bus costs 10 CUC for a day – but the best way to explore Havana is on foot.

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

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