**Cuba: escaping Castro's shadow**

**Fidel’s reign is over, but his presence is palpable everywhere – from the faded revolutionary slogans to the magnificent utopian failure of the National School of Arts. Graham Boynton falls in love with a country saved by its political isolation.**

By Graham Boynton  
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International organisations such as Unesco and the World Monuments Fund are working to save Havana's heritage from demolition Photo: Getty



Instead of corporate advertisements smeared across the landscape, hoardings display revolutionary slogans Photo: Getty



The same 1950s cars are still found throughout the streets of Havana Photo: Getty



All the joie de vivre of Cuba seems to be concentrated in the heady exuberance of the music, the heat and the sensuality of the dancers Photo: Getty



Floridita is the bar where Hemingway drank up to 12 giant daiquiris a day Photo: Getty

It is Wednesday night in Havana’s Floridita bar, and the place is already heaving with tourists who seem perfectly happy to eat the mediocre food and pay twice the going rate ($6) for a watery daiquiri while listening to an average salsa band working its way through “Guantanamera” for the zillionth time with a fixed grin on its collective face.

At first glance, this could be any tourist bar anywhere in the world – the long, worn oak bar lining one wall, the rickety tables and off-white tablecloths – but this is Havana and the Floridita is no ordinary tourist trap. This is the bar where Hemingway famously drank up to 12 Papa Dobles (giant daiquiris) a day while amusing visiting Hollywood hotshots such as Spencer Tracy and Ava Gardner. Should you have any doubts, there are photographs of him all over the walls and a life-sized bronze statue by José Soberón in his favourite spot in the corner.

Because Havana has been caught in a socio-political time warp for a half century since the Revolution, it is not difficult to imagine Hemingway sitting right here, precisely where the bronze is positioned, then raising up his large frame and shambling off down the Calle Obispo to his room at the Ambos Mundos hotel. The same 1950s cars are still wheezing along the streets, the same buildings stand (although, today, in vastly increased states of decrepitude) and this bar is still serving Papa Dobles well into the tropical night. Old Havana is like a living, breathing movie set, a sound stage for a Spanish film noir.

Tonight, this particular movie’s characters are an eclectic group of drinkers. Leonardo Padura Fuentes, author of popular detective novels, is locked in animated conversation with English academic Stephen Wilkinson, an expert on contemporary Cuban culture. Then there is Eliades Ochoa, stetson-wearing singer-guitarist of the Buena Vista Social Club, with his spiritual successors, Israel Rojas and Yoel Martinez, leaders of Buena Fé, a young music group, and Nick van Gruisen, a British representative of the World Monuments Fund, talking to David Soul, formerly of Starsky and Hutch and, more recently, the West End musical, Jerry Springer – The Opera.

The conversation swoops and falls as Cristal beers and daiquiris flow. Soul is planning a one-man show about Hemingway’s last days in Cuba. Padura’s most recent novel, Adios Hemingway, concerns a murder in the grounds of Finca Vigia, Hemingway’s home of 30 years just outside Havana. Van Gruisen, meanwhile, is lamenting his failed attempts to meet up with Eusebio Leal, the man behind the city’s architectural restoration. You have it all here: art, music, literature, architecture... and rum. Welcome to Havana.

The topic of conversation that surfaces often is, of course, Fidel Castro (who, shortly before our arrival in Cuba, had announced that he was stepping down after nearly 50 years of rule). The Comandante en Jefe was one of modern politics’ greatest survivors: he was 32 when he took power and, at the time of our visit, is 81. During that time, 10 US presidents have come and nine have gone, some of them instrumental in ordering a number of the 600-odd assassination attempts that Fabian Escalante, his former security chief, claims were made on Castro.

One would imagine that Fidel’s announcement would reverberate through the Cuban capital – but it doesn’t. There are no big demonstrations, no public displays, no sign of his internal enemies raising their heads above the parapets to denounce him.

The reason, Wilkinson says, is that the post-Fidel era has already begun. For the past few years, Cuba has been tiptoeing into its next phase, planning radical agricultural reforms, engaging in joint ventures, building tourism. It is difficult to obtain hard facts since the governance is still in the hands of a tight inner circle, but according to Wilkinson, much of the farmland is being turned over to private use (if not outright ownership) and agricultural representatives from 19 American states have visited the island.

There is a healthy flow of European Union delegations, too, and architect Norman Foster and the French construction firm Bouygues are said to be proposing significant developments. There also appear to be Canadians everywhere, and there is a lot of talk about building golf courses to lure upscale tourists – including Americans, whose numbers have dropped by 80 per cent in the past decade to just 25,000 travellers. That is due partly to the hassle of having to connect (illegally) through a neighbouring country to bypass US passport controls, partly to the fact that (extremely inconveniently) Cuba withdrew the US dollar from circulation in 2004.

Though we haven’t exhausted the subject of Fidel (who here is like a spectre in the background, seeming to provide a kind of ideological comfort to older, more sentimental citizens, if not the 75 per cent of Cubans born since 1959), the conversation in the Floridita inevitably ends and we stumble out into the steamy night. Van Gruisen and I jump in a cab and head to one of Havana’s Casas de la Música, in the manicured suburb of Miramar.

There is nothing manicured about this Casa. It is heaving with Havana hookers, most hanging around the entrance, pawing and cajoling every Western male who arrives, hoping to be escorted inside and paid in forex for their services. We are asked by two muscle-bound bouncers if we want girls and, before we can answer, two highly-perfumed hookers are at our side, running their nails up and down our backs. We politely demur and slip inside unscathed. The audience is split between locals and foreigners and only half of the foreign men have brought hookers with them. (It is reasonably safe to assume here that every lithe, smouldering young woman in the company of a bald, middle-aged, pasty-faced man with a paunch and a silly smile on his face is a hooker.)

The live band is coming on later; in the meantime, the crowd is moving deliriously to Armando, a DJ who plays salsa, timba and Latinised hip hop. The locals dance like wired Twyla Tharps, while the tourists move like bank managers who have had too much to drink (which, of course, many of them probably are and have).

After a couple of hours and a couple more daiquiris, Van Gruisen and I decide that, if we are not going to dance (and we are white men who really can’t dance), we would like to try another brand of music – so we head for La Zorra y el Cuervo, a basement jazz club near the Hotel Nacional. It reminds me of the Manhattan joints of the Sixties and Seventies, with earnest-looking people in black-rimmed glasses bopping their heads to post-bebop free jazz with a Latin tinge. The band leader is Yasek Manzano, a trumpet virtuoso and one of Cuba’s hottest young musicians, who provides a cerebral end to a hectic night in this vivid, thrilling city.

I am here because I have fallen in love – head over heels, if I’m honest - with Cuba and, more specifically, with Havana. This is my second visit in three months and, halfway through that daiquiri-infused night at the Floridita, I am already planning my third. Unlike Jack Nicholson, who arrived here in 1998 proclaiming Cuba “a paradise” and Fidel Castro “a genius”, I see a place that possesses a magnificent legacy – architecturally, culturally, spiritually – that has been suppressed and held back by half a century of socialist torpor. Far from being a genius, Castro was a political anachronism for decades before he resigned, holding on to l’illusion lyrique (the early idealistic phase of the revolution) far beyond its sell-by date and dragging his talented, free-spirited people down with him.

There is nothing glamorous about Cuba’s grinding poverty. The Habaneros earn on average £8 a month (plus meagre state-financed rations) and although most have enjoyed a good education and many are skilled, there is little work for them outside tourism and a few service industries. That is why so many of them – as we discovered on our city tour – have turned into full-time hustlers.

Following a visit to the Partagas Cigar Factory, we were led by our guide to a cloakroom and offered boxes of Cohiba VIs for £13: an offer difficult to refuse. Later, we found similar cigars for a quarter of the price. Cubans don’t call this stealing; they use the words arreglar, which literally translated means “to rearrange”, or busqueda, which means “a search”.

That said, Cuba’s isolation has bequeathed this island a fascinating other-worldliness. Instead of corporate advertisements smeared across the landscape, hoardings display revolutionary slogans – “Venceremos!” (“We will win!”) and “Patria o Muerte!” (“Fatherland or Death!”) – or giant portraits of Che as sainted revolutionary and American presidents as counter-revolutionary Satans. Tramps, beggars and hookers are everywhere: an accepted part of society. And 49 years of stultifying socialism have created such spectacular indifference to the concept of service that you can almost see the steam rising from tourists waiting for food or drink.

It is ironic, too, that the revolution’s economic failures have saved from demolition Habana Vieja, the crumbling old part of the city declared a World Heritage site in the 1980s. In his last years of rule, president Fulgencio Batista was planning to replace the buildings with casinos, high-rise hotels and nightclubs. Today, international organisations such as Unesco and the World Monuments Fund are working with the Cuban government to preserve the place against the ravages of the Caribbean climate.

Some 150 of Old Havana’s buildings date back to the 16th and 17th centuries, about 200 from the 18th and more than 450 from the 19th, which makes Havana the best preserved colonial city in the Americas. However, an estimated nine buildings a week are collapsing. A walk round the old city provides evidence enough of its fragile beauty; starting in the oldest square, the Plaza of Arms, within half an hour you will have taken in the Governor’s Palace, the city’s finest example of baroque architecture; the open-air Doric temple, El Templete , where the city was founded in 1519; and the magnificent Cathedral of San Cristóbal, described by the novelist Alejo Carpentier as “music turned to stone”.

If you want to see Havana alive and vibrant, not simply as an architectural showpiece, stroll along Paseo de Martí on a Sunday afternoon. This marvellous thoroughfare, running for a mile from Parque Central to the Malecón ocean boulevard, is a raised walkway of inlaid marble lined with Spanish laurel trees, abuzz on Sundays with the Habaneros strutting their stuff, dancing to boom boxes, playing dominoes, engaged in heated debate.

In its people, in the sounds and smells of Havana, you sense the intrigue, the mystery, the untrammelled exoticism of a city that has moved to its own beat for centuries. Occasionally the stench of sewage wafts by, reminding you that this really is a dilapidated third world city, not a film set. The decrepitude of the buildings and piles of rubble also provide vivid reminders, as does the corpse of a dog long dead that we almost trip over at the junction with the Malecón.

My most profound contact with the emotional landscape of Cuba’s rough-and-tumble history came on a clandestine visit to the National School of Arts. This is a place that sums up the contradictions – the high aspirations, low achievements and broken dreams – of Castro’s Communist utopia.

It was here, on the site of the former Havana Country Club, that Fidel and Che Guevara chose to locate the epicentre of artistic and cultural excellence. In this cradle of Batista’s capitalist decadence – 163 acres of groomed lawns and lakes – the revolutionaries created a new arts academy, home to drama, music, plastic arts, modern dance and ballet. Because of restrictions on imported cement and steel, it was constructed mainly from locally produced bricks and terracotta tiles.

By the mid 1960s, money had started to run out and the half-finished project fell into disrepair, becoming a weedy refuge for goats and chickens. Now, decades later, the project is being repaired piece by piece. Getting in to see this magnificent place proved to be difficult (a photography student eventually smuggled us through the gates in her car). Once inside, the soaring ambition and the ultimate neglect of this place hit me all at once and I found myself close to tears. This is not something I experience frequently, much less confess to, but for some reason, standing in the centre of the Centre for Plastic Arts quite overwhelmed me – as if, for a brief, snatched moment, I had seen the purity of the human spirit. It had been raining, so the terracotta tiles glistened in the late-afternoon sunlight. Over in the corner, two young students practised the trumpet and across the rolling lawns a pair of dazzling dancers rehearsed under the gaze of an instructor. Apparently, there are more than 1,000 students studying at the school, many of them foreign and 100 or so American.

Van Gruisen would like the WMF to donate some money to the ongoing rehab of the buildings – and, after we leave, he makes arrangements to meet up with Lázaro Zamora Vargas , the school’s director. Vargas later tells him that the Cuban government is not looking for outside funding for this project and has earmarked about £12 million, but we afterwards learn that a considerable sum is coming from outside. Like so many things in Cuba, the truth about the restoration of the School of Arts is elusive.

To get a measure of what is happening elsewhere on the island, Van Gruisen and I hire a driver-guide by the name of Oscar Otero , a young English teacher who like so many smart, educated Cubans has abandoned his chosen profession out of financial desperation. I met people like him throughout Cuba – a hydraulics engineer working as a waiter, a teacher cleaning tables in Havana, a doctor working as a ghillie – and was constantly reminded of the folly of an education system without a functioning economy to utilise skills.

We head east towards the old sugar towns of Cienfuegos and Trinidad on the island’s south coast. The autopista is in varying degrees of decay and Oscar dodges giant potholes, trundling horse-drawn carts, huge modern air-conditioned tourist buses and asthmatic old Ladas, sometimes all at the same time. The journey is worth it: the two towns are a revelation.

Cienfuegos is a symphony of classical Spanish architecture, with a cathedral (dating from 1870) and the Teatro Tomas Terry (1889) which is, rather amazingly, named after the sugar baron who made his fortune nursing weak and sick slaves back to health and reselling them at a profit. As with so many of Cuba’s grand buildings, the theatre interior is frayed and worn, but it is a beautiful creation made almost entirely of Cuban hardwoods. We walk in on a rehearsal that could have been taking place a century ago.

Trinidad, where we spend the night, is 20 miles along a winding coastal road to the east of Cienfuegos, and is another stunning, slightly dishevelled place of pleasure. Once the island’s sugar capital – called the Valle de los Ingenios (“Valley of the Sugar Mills”) – the town is now all sleepy, pastel-coloured buildings and cobblestone streets that explode into life at 10pm when the Casa de la Música lights up: a swirl of music and dance held in the town’s small outdoor amphitheatre. Tonight, there is an audience of about 250, including 50 or 60 tourists, nearly everyone dancing as the 12-piece band plays salsa, salsa-rap, reggae and hip hop.

All the joie de vivre of Cuba seems to be concentrated in this one moonlit spot: the heady exuberance of the music, the heat, the sensuality of the dancers, the uncomplicated friendliness of the people. Unlike Havana, which like all capitals has an undercurrent of hustle and sleaze, Trinidad is the epitome of innocent pleasure: people having a good time – and welcoming visitors. But then this is what Cuba does to me; it allows me to put aside my ingrained scepticism of homo sapiens and indulge in uncomplicated pleasures.

The following morning we head back to Havana, winding our way up from the south coast into the verdant hills called Alturas de Santa Clara , through small villages, past ox wagons pulling agricultural goods from one small settlement to another and real gauchos on horseback riding into the sunset. Oscar, our guide, opens up a bit and talks about life in modern Cuba. His sister, he says, is an economist who earns £7 a month, plus an annual bonus of £15. Although he admits it’s a struggle, I do not once hear him criticise Castro or the government directly in the eight days we are together.

He prefers not to talk about politics, but when I mention names such as Elizardo Sánchez , the anti-Castro activist, he immediately falls back into Party speak, calling him a “notorious dissident, totally at the disposal of the Americans”. When he talks about the Sixties, he refers to it as “the period when the revolution triumphed”. And, as with so many Cubans, Oscar’s dislike of America is never far from the surface. “We have the most powerful country in the world 80 miles off our shores and they don’t like us. We have lived under the threat of invasion from the Americans all our lives,” he says, with total conviction.

When I ask Oscar if he is keen to travel abroad, he replies: “It is not important to me. I am studying tourism at the moment, and that is enough for me...” and his voice trails off. I don’t pursue the subject further: Cubans have enough demons to wrestle without Westerners like me badgering them into saying things they are likely to regret. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Cuba is still one of the world’s most censored nations. The long-term impact of Raúl Castro’s sudden removal, earlier this year, of the ban on private citizens owning computers and mobile phones remains to be seen.

We join the steady stream of tourist buses ferrying their cargo to one of the largest resort developments in the Caribbean: Varadero, with more than 50 hotels and 15,000 rooms, as well as dozens of charter flights (more than 50 a week from Canada alone) that bring two million tourists a year to this island. What they get are very cheap holidays on the most pristine stretch of beach I have seen in the Caribbean – and the almost complete absence of Cubans. Of course, there are Cubans working behind the scenes, keeping the wheels of this gigantic resort turning, and there are Cubans cleaning the rooms and waiting the tables, but until Raúl Castro lifted restrictions in March, locals were not allowed to holiday here, even if they could afford it. Very little has changed since.

Just how little becomes apparent when we are having lunch at Xanadu, a lavish mansion in the Varadero area, built in the 1930s by the chemicals magnate Alfred du Pont in a prime location overlooking the cobalt waters of the Straits of Florida . At the lovely top-floor bar where we drink the almost obligatory daiquiris, Oscar drops his bombshell. Having spent his entire time with us quietly expressing his admiration for the political status quo, he announces that he is planning to emigrate to Canada.

He doesn’t want to talk about it too much, but he hints that it is the constant scramble to survive and the no-can-do society that is contemporary Cuba (there is a saying that, in Cuba, if you have to ask, the answer is no) that has made him decide... And he certainly doesn’t want to say any more about it.

Riding back to the airport in a 1956 Oldsmobile driven by a cheerful fellow by the name of Jorge, we sail past other Fifties American limos, like so many gaily painted ships in a sea of automotive nostalgia, and feel well satisfied with our time in Cuba. From a distance, the Olds look shiny and well-maintained, but close up you can see rust patches, broken-off bits and rather tatty upholstery – a bit like Havana, really. Jorge grins manically the whole way, repeating the words “1956 Oldsmobile” and, on flat roads, easing the stick shift into neutral to save petrol.

A few weeks after arriving home, I discover that my credit cards have been cloned and my bank account all but emptied. A quick study of the various expenditures – Miami’s Cubano Pizza and El Presidente Hotel both feature prominently – confirms my suspicions that somewhere along the road in Cuba, the hustlers got hold of my cards and copied them. But it was probably more a case of arreglar or busqueda than outright theft. And it won’t stop me from going back.

# Bay of Capitalist Pigs

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The American embargo on Cuba has spanned 48 years—a lifetime for many Cubans, and nearly all of Fidel Castro’s tenure as Maximum Leader. Now that Castro, 81 and ailing, has officially retired, the embargo’s end may be near. Some think Fidel’s brother Raúl (assuming he successfully consolidates power) might free Cuba’s economy and allow private investment.

U.S. business interests have been eagerly awaiting Castro’s departure—one way or another—for years. Otto Reich, who worked within the Bush administration on post-Castro planning and other Cuba issues from 2001 to 2004, says that for a time, after the Cold War ended, construction companies were pre-positioning materials in Florida warehouses in anticipation of a Cuban counterrevolution. Bulldozers and cranes waited to cross the Florida Straits and start building condos and shopping centers.

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| [Havana](http://www.theatlantic.com/images/issues/200802u/winhavana.jpg) |
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Optimists envision post-embargo Havana as a capitalist paradise, restored to glory by the healing powers of the free market. But an invasion of developers might have its drawbacks as well—particularly for a city with Havana’s storied history and distinctive architecture.

New residents and tourists will strain resources. Joseph L. Scarpaci, an urban geographer at Virginia Tech, says Havana already shudders under its population’s demands. It is plagued by brownouts, even though air-conditioning is still rare. Fresh water is scarce, and human waste flows untreated into the sea.

Nicolás Quintana, 82, a Cuban American architect heading a Florida International University project for Havana’s post-Castro future, likens the city’s condition to that of postwar Warsaw or, less fancifully, post-Zhivkov Sofia. For decades, the island’s construction materials have gone to the military, and as a result, Havana is crumbling.

Quintana dreams of returning in time to save Havana from collapse but before unchecked growth robs the city of its character. His project, an initiative with support from Cuban exiles—among them economists, ecologists, and urban planners—calls for preserving the city’s narrow streets and short blocks, and encouraging concentrated vertical development, creating something like “a latin­ized Paris.”

Whenever Havana opens, it will face a clash of interests—between developers and preservationists, and between moneyed exiles and poor habaneros. This map, based loosely on the visions of Quintana, Cuban American economist Jorge Sanguinetty, and others who’ve been eager for Castro’s end, depicts what might follow, and how the city might be rebuilt.