

Getting to know Cuba

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Arriving in Havana by night is only fair for your five senses. They would be overwhelmed if you arrived in the middle of a clear-blue Caribbean day.

Even still, you'll need all the olfactory, auditory and visual capacity you can muster to process a Havana night.

It's been a lifelong dream of mine to travel to Cuba, a dream that grew more desperate as Cuba's aging revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, became more frail.

I wanted to see the Havana of legend, the '53 Chevys, the mansions of Batista's era faded to a dull, communist gray. I wanted to see the salsa clubs, the poverty and the passion of Castro's Cuba.

Most of all, I wanted to see people of Havana, the thriving masses of islanders stuck in neutral for more than 50 years, a people who prompt more curiosity world-wide than just about any country.

Havana after nightfall

When the sun falls to the west of the city, dips down below the Malecon and slides into the Caribbean Sea like an orange slice into a tropical drink, there sounds an inaudible call for the city's 3 million residents.

The street population swells with the fading light. The barrios that surround and make up La Habana Vieja, or old Havana, become little lighted worlds unto themselves. The old gather under streetlights to smoke cigars and play dominos and the young strut like peacocks in fiery, skin-tight fabrics of pink, orange or lime.

In the hotel district, the tree-lined Prado promenade offers a people-watching paradise. On its mosaic marble tiles tread the feet of Habaneros, the affectionate term for those Cubans who live in Havana. They filter out of the barrios in droves for a look at the bourgeois tourists inclined to wander no further than the verandas of the few restored hotels.

The afternoon siesta has ended by 6 p.m. Dinner is hours away and the Habaneros begin to visit the small bodegas, often just a barred window into which some pesos are passed before a hand extends with a shot of coffee, a bottle of water or beer. For many Cubans, this is the only



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Sports remain the heart and soul of Havana. Children will use anything to kick around as a makeshift soccer ball.

More photos

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allowable exchange of goods for money near the tourist centers.

After their first, and usually only, purchase of the night, it will be all window-shopping and American dreams for the hungry Habaneros.

I'm told that heat is always an issue in Havana, where the Centro area is typically several degrees warmer than the rest of the city due to high-density population, lack of green spaces and poor building design.

When you step outside the air-conditioned room in your hotel, the oppressive humidity bears down on you with all the force of a tropical storm. No material will make your clothes comfortable in this combination of heat and moisture, though linen feels better than cotton. No sooner have you dried yourself after a second or third shower of the day than your skin is damp again. The Habaneros would as soon walk around sans clothing, but a communist sense of modesty pervades the culture and prevents complete nudity.

The sound of Havana

Music pulses at all hours, directing the undulating crowds. Just under the ruffles of jazz guitar, the scratchy maracas and the tropical pop of the bongo drums is the deeper, more-resonant sound of the African drums. You can't hear it exactly, it's almost as if they were played on that faraway continent in another time and carried here on the same jet stream that carries the big storms from the Sahara.

But you can feel the African drums in the marrow of your bones. The Habaneros feel it too, and they congregate in writhing clumps of torsos and limbs, a gyrating mass of brown, black and light skin in tune with the frenetic energy of the Havana night. There are no boundaries for the music or the dancing. Each could start sporadically inside a night club or on a dirty street corner.

There is electricity in the air. Light shows over Havana harbor stay in the distance, producing an anxiety that can only be soothed by the plop of hot raindrops, the reassurance that a tropical thunderstorm brings.

When the salsa clubs open around 9 p.m., the Habaneros move toward their favorite nightspots. The tourists migrate to the hotels where the salsa shows are practiced and safe, where plastic-fabricated clothing enhances the dance and the dancers are paid to play.

In the barrios, where the Habaneros dance in back-room bars to the beat of the Afro-Cuban All Stars and overdubbed salsa pop, clothing only accentuates the most flamboyant dancers, the good dancers let their skin and their moves produce the show.

Amidst the music and the tightly controlled motions of the most disciplined salsa dancers, there is a release of sorts. Waves of pent up energy are given off with each hip thrust and trumpet blast. And when the music subsides, for it never dies away completely, they wander back out into the streets with wide eyes, eager for the remains of the night.

In the wee hours

It is in the wee hours that you notice the rum bottles passed around. The sweet smell of it wafts over the scent of ficus trees and perfumed women, or chicas as the men call them. Around 2 p.m., the rhythm of the night plays a descending scale and hums along at a lower cadence and with sweeter melodies.

The heat doesn't seem quite so oppressive now and the Habaneros are on concrete benches,

arms and legs intertwined, the bottles clinking against statues of Cuban heroes. It is at this moment that you can finally tear your eyes from the sights and sounds, your nose has become somewhat accustomed to the smells, just enough to wake you to the realization that you are tired.

This is the Havana I came to see, smell, touch and to hear. The city and its people were everything I imagined and perhaps even more vivid than the colors and smells conjured in my mind from photographs and descriptive stories.

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