





island time

Discovering the Treasure
of Havana, Cuba

Cuba's capital city of Havana is known for its color. The people, the architecture, and the cars are all dressed in vibrant hues. The bright colors complement the local music and culture.



Less than an hour flight from South Florida, Havana's treasures await: music, food, art, architecture, and of course the cars. Going to Cuba is like traveling back in time sixty years in only sixty minutes, but this time warp won't last long. Now is the time to go.

Written by Heidi Siefkas

With its colonial architecture, cobblestone streets, and rolling museum of classic American cars serving as a backdrop, Cuba will surprise you with the modern treasures that are being created in this artistic hotbed. Havana's artists, chefs, and mixologists are showing the world what can be made with Cuban *sabor* (taste/flare).

Whether you stay in a hotel or a *casa particular* (bed-and-breakfast) in Vedado, Miramar, or Old Havana, the best way to see Havana is on foot. Put on your adventure hat and comfortable shoes as the streets of Havana are to be explored. Cuban life is outside of the house: in the streets, parks, cafes, and of course the Malecón, the five-mile

ocean promenade that is nicknamed the largest sofa in the world.

Begin in Old Havana at the first of four squares, Plaza de Armas (Arms Square), to see the government palace, colonial fort, and its daily bookfair with new and used books and antiques. Perhaps you'll find a copy of Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man in the Sea* to bring home.



know before you go

Heidi Siefkas is an author, speaker, and adventurer. Her most recent book, *Cubicle to Cuba*, highlights another side of the country. Find out more about Siefkas at her website, www.heidisiefkas.com, and catch some of her top Cuba travel tips below.

1 Cash is king. You will need to bring all the money that you intend to spend in Cuba in cash and exchange it for the local currency once you arrive. Your credit and debit cards won't work in Cuba.

2 Prepare to be *incomunicado* (out of reach). Although some cell phone carriers, like Verizon, do have roaming services in Cuba, other carriers do not offer service there. You will be able to use landlines at hotels and Wi-Fi for purchase.

3 There are no corner pharmacies like Walgreens. Bring all of your prescriptions, a supply of common over-the-counter medications, and a first aid kit.

4 Be prepared for rustic bathrooms. Many toilets don't have seats. Many bathrooms don't have soap. Bring your own supply of toilet tissue as well as hand sanitizer.

5 Pack your patience. This Caribbean nation takes "island time" to a completely different level. Take time to enjoy the moment and watch the world go by.

For more history about the author, continue on to Hotel Ambos Mundos (Both Worlds) where he lived for seven years, and its sixth floor, open-air terrace with a view of all of Old Havana. Enjoy a café cubano espresso drink while scoping out the next square, Plaza de la Catedral (Cathedral Square). After a visit inside the splendid Baroque church and a stroll along its restored square, take time for a mojito at La Bodeguita del Medio (small store in the middle), another of Hemingway's haunts, which is just up the street from the cathedral.

Whether you continue on foot or choose to hire a *bici-taxi* (pedal cab) from Cathedral Square, you are only minutes from Plaza Vieja (Old Square). The brilliant colors of the buildings as well as the art sculptures in the center of the Old Square make a great stop for a treat: a chilled coconut, a craft beer, or a piece of art from one of the many galleries.

En route to your final plaza, you will pass Havana's aqueduct built in the 1800s. Then, you will feast your eyes on Plaza San Francisco, which is near the harbor with a beautiful fountain and numerous modern art sculptures. It makes for yet another shutterbug stop.

But, save room on your memory card. No trip to Havana is complete without a classic car ride. Grab your favorite 1950s convertible and personal driver from Plaza San Francisco for a panoramic joy ride. A city tour takes a little under an hour, in which you can drive along the city wall to the Capitol building, see the University of Havana, and stop at Revolution Square for a picture. Then return to Havana along the Malecón before returning to your accommodations to freshen up for a night on the town.

For music lovers, it doesn't get better than Havana. All performances, from Buena Vista Social Club to La Tropicana, start at ten or eleven o'clock at night. Even if you are sleepy upon arrival, you won't be for long with lively horns, unbelievable percussion, and sultry, suave singers and dancers. The night is when Havana comes alive.

The treasures of Havana will surprise and delight you. From feeling like a kid again in the back of a 1950s convertible to dancing to salsa and an having a daiquiri at Hemingway's La Floridita (Little Florida), Havana will romance you. Now is the time to go and discover it for yourself. ■