



A home in Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage site known for its Spanish colonial architecture. Opposite page: The Malecón, Havana's famous sea-splashed drive, is a favored meeting place for friends and family.



Cuba Unbound

Kimberley Lovato travels to this enigmatic place, where she kayaks on the Bay of Pigs and in Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, the Caribbean's largest wetlands, explores Trinidad and Havana, and discovers there's a lot to learn, and love, about this long-shuttered country on the verge of transformation.

- PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAD CASE -

The rhythmic plop and whoosh of my paddles lulled me into a trance as I skimmed across the mangrove-lined bay.

"This is a day of firsts," said Peter Grubb, owner of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho-based ROW Adventures, the organizer of this six-day water-bound odyssey. "It's not just the first American people-to-people kayak tour of Cuba, it's also, most likely, the first time a group of Americans has been on these waters for a long time."

We're not on just any body of water but the Bahía de los Cochinos, a.k.a. the Bay of Pigs, the infamous inlet scooped out of Cuba's southern coast, about 110 miles from the capital city of Havana. The place where, on April 17, 1961, the CIA-backed invasion and attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro's government began.

But that was a long time ago. On this day, the only battle I see is a brown pelican dive-bombing the tranquil midnight blue water for dinner.

"What remains are the stories," said our young, soft-spoken kayak guide Lerdo. "Someday we move forward."

To say Cuba is a place like no other is like call-

ing the Himalayas a mountain range. It's the truth, but the statement feels horribly inadequate. Though Cuba, the Caribbean's largest island, lies just 90 miles off our coast, its decades of communist rule and U.S.-imposed embargo on travel and trade have kept it all but hidden from American eyes and influence for the past six decades. What travelers are now discovering, however, is a country that teams with a unique brand of culture and life—soulful, convivial and complex—that, despite strict restrictions, has thrived in many ways.

An estimated one in every 15 Cubans is college educated, and, according to UNESCO, irrespective of class, education at every level is free, including university. The country's 20 medical schools turn out thousands of doctors, the country's largest export, who are sent to developing countries around the world. Arts are as important as academics, and Cuba counts more than 40 art schools under the umbrella of its National Center of Schools of Art that include ballet, fine arts and cinema. And then there's the music. Like air, it's essential and everywhere, and what struck me was was the breadth of talented musi-

cians, whether it was a trumpeter serenading me at a rooftop bar on the beach or a five piece band pumping out popular salsa, son or reggaeton hits on a Trinidad café stage or in a hip Havana night club. Music, and its accompanying sensuous hip swirls, is the soul of social life in Cuba.

Despite all that is good, Cubans, it seems, still fear the government as much as they've lost faith in it. Frustration reigns, and most young people crave improvement to their living conditions and future earning opportunities. "Education is great and important," a Havana club bouncer told me. "But then what? What do we do with it? I'm 30 years old and I've never left Cuba."

In 2015, President Obama announced the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the Raúl Castro government, and for the first time in decades, Americans have alighted ashore, eager to see if the frozen-in-time cliché is true (it is), and witness a country transforming.

It was this curiosity, as well as strong client demand that nudged Grubb to obtain a license to operate a people-to-people educational exchange group program, one of the 12 approved categories

Clockwise, from top left: The Basilica of San Francisco de Asís in old Havana; a man poses for photos with a Cuban cigar in Trinidad; Havana street vendors sell fruit, candy and late night snacks; music is the soul of Cuba.



Kayaking through mangroves at Ciénaga de Zapata National Park. Below: Detroit classics still rumble through the streets of Havana.

of travel to Cuba. Athletic competitions, visiting relatives, professional research, and humanitarian and religious activities are other approved categories of travel. People-to-people itineraries are one of the most popular ways to visit Cuba, since anyone can participate, and they emphasize maximum interaction with locals. (Come-and-go-as-you-please tourism to Cuba is still banned for Americans by the U.S. under the embargo terms.)

“Setting this up in Cuba was like doing a Rubik’s Cube,” laughs Grubb, whose company has led tours all over the world for more than 37 years. “The pieces needed to align. Adding kayaking to the mix complicated things because it had never been done.” On top of the requisite mountains of paperwork and relationship building, Grubb relied on his friend and noted Cuba travel expert Christopher P. Baker to help create a solid and varied itinerary, a process that, from concept to our arrival in Havana, took around three years.

If the upfront planning was tedious, it wasn’t apparent to our small band of American wayfarers that, along with Grubb and his 23-year-old

daughter Mariah, included two couples, a father-son team and solo travelers from California, Idaho, Washington, D.C and Mexico, all meeting for the first time in Havana where our trip began and ended. In between was a six-day journey to the southern coast of the country that would blend stays in towns, including the preserved colonial gem of Trinidad, with visits to sites such as Hemingway’s former house, Finca Vigia, outside of Havana (left untouched, books on shelves and typewriter on desk) and to a farm not far from Playa Larga where near-extinct Cuban crocodiles are bred and raised, then released back into the wild. We paddled up the serene Guaurabo River, to a rocky cove for snorkeling, and survived a bicep-burning crossing of Cienfuegos Bay to a waterfront restaurant called Rancho Cristal, a casual outdoor spot under a thatched roof, for platters of fish, breaded pork, fried bananas and potato-like yucca.

In double and single crimson kayaks, we launched into a shallow lagoon early one morning at Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, the Caribbean’s largest wetlands, covering an area of 1,930 square miles. It was our longest day on the water, about eight hours. We followed our guide across mossy swamps and turquoise ponds, and around uninhabited islets, and he led us into an opening in a mangrove thicket, invisible to a mere kayaking mortal like me, and through a serpentine tunnel. Though I was relieved for the break from the intense sun, my clumsy maneuvering was complicated by the need to slap mosquitoes from my exposed neck. We emerged onto a vast and empty bay where popcorn clouds broke the myriad shades of blue water blending into cerulean sky.

More than 100,000 people visit the park each year, our park guide told us, but for hours only the pulsating jellyfish and the dozens of species of migratory and endemic birds—Zapata wren, Zapata rail and Cuban parrots—kept us company. We broke for lunch on a beach and snorkeled

above blue crabs and lobsters. I swear I saw a small shark whip by, but I was the only one.

On the water and off, we were accompanied by a resident guide from Cuban travel company Havana-natur, the 28-year-old Roberto Noya, who with an everlasting smile imparted tidbits of Cuban history to us, his first group of Americans. Noya’s good humor tolerated our teaching him English phrases such as “fake it ‘til you make it” and “up the creek without a paddle,” and he willingly answered any question we threw at him: “Yes, change is on the way, it’s always on the way.”

“We are happy, but we could be happier, of course.”

“Mostly we’d like the opportunity to earn more and to travel.”

Major Cuban policy reforms over the past decade relaxed restrictions on private enterprise, which has nourished an entrepreneurial spirit on the island. These days you’ll see Cubans selling fruit, late night pizza and candy, and even cheese by going house to house on bikes—anything to earn extra money (the average Cuban salary is just \$20 per month). Privately-owned businesses like cafés, restaurants and shops are more common now too, as is the casa particular—a privately owned house with rooms to rent to foreigners. Accommodations can be anything from a single bedroom to an independent apartment, with a private bath. Though the interior and furnishings are simple and unfussy compared to American hotels and B&Bs, the rooms are clean and comfortable. Travelers should bring their own soap, shampoo and any extra toiletries as they are not easy to come by if forgotten. Outside of Havana, our group bunked in a casa particular each night, providing a bona fide peek into local life.

In the one-street beach town of Playa Larga at the apex of the Bay of Pigs, children in blue and white uniforms strolled to school while horse drawn buggies rolled past cinder block dwellings, including Hostal Enrique, whose namesake, along



with his wife Dalia, welcomed us like long-lost roommates. Around their table, we drank Cristal beer, the local lager, and ate grilled fish and seafood, salad, rice and beans, tostones (fried plantains) and my personal favorite, ropa vieja (Spanish for “old clothes”), tender shreds of braised beef served with rice and beans.

The economic benefits for casa particular owners are substantial, with average pricing ranging between \$15-\$50 per room, per night, depending on location, plus around \$3-\$5 for breakfast and \$5-\$10 for dinner. For Julio Muñoz of Casa Colonial Muñoz in the UNESCO city of Trinidad, it has meant something more.

“Having people in our home helped us to learn about the world outside of Cuba,” the 47-year old Muñoz explained. His stately colonial home was built in 1800—he turned it into a casa particular in 1998, which he runs with his wife Rosa. As part of our people-to-people itinerary, we gathered in his tiled living room one evening amidst framed family portraits and ornate mirrors. Muñoz is an engineer by degree and commands his English well, swinging his suntanned arms around when he speaks in a manner that would rival any good Italian. He pointed to the room in which he was born, now one of the casa particular’s three guestrooms, and then told us about his most memorable caller:

world-renowned photographer David Alan Harvey, who came to stay in 1999.

“Meeting him awoke in me a passion for photography and more importantly for my city,” said Muñoz. “David told me, ‘I’ve traveled all over the world and Trinidad is a very special place.’” A message that, sometimes, the most underappreciated destination is our own backyard.

Meeting the photographer inspired Muñoz to publish *Trinidad de Cuba*, a photobook showcasing Trinidad’s baroque and neoclassical buildings along with its spirited denizens.

Someone in our group asked Muñoz, “If you had a crystal ball, what do you see for Cuba’s future?” He narrowed his eyes, and rubbed his hand over his crew cut, salt-and-pepper hair. “It’s a little cloudy. I see changes, some improvements, but it’s not fast. I’m not old, but I’m not young either. I mustn’t waste more time.”

We spent our last night in the Technicolor swirl of Havana. Women in ruffled dresses and striped headscarves, and men in leisure suits with eight-inch cigars dangling from their lips, posed for photos. Musicians, young and old, occupied the city’s casual cafés and hip galleries and clubs, and the rhythm persuaded even these American hips to swivel at a quick 1-2-3 beat.

Like most Americans, I couldn’t help but marvel

at the gumball-colored Detroit-heyday hulks that rumbled like new along the city’s main drags, a true testament to Cuban ingenuity and enterprise. After a week of propelling myself around various Cuban waterways, hailing a 1950s era Buick taxi on dry land after a long night out seemed an ideal way to cap off my trip.

I sunk into the shredded vinyl seat, the night’s revelry heavy on my limbs. As the sky gradually turned sunrise pink, the driver eventually asked me where I was from. “San Francisco,” I told him.

“Someday, I’d like to travel to the United States,” he said, turning up the radio.

I felt a little melancholy thinking about someday. What’s to come for Cuba, as Muñoz pointed out, is cloudy. But for me, it was clear—a future love for Cuba is inevitable. I yearned to return before I’d even left.

But right then, I just wanted to remember it as it was. So I closed my eyes and let the Latin horns and bongo beats fill the car, and my head. And as we turned onto the Malecón, the city’s famed sea spray battered drive, I dangled my hand out the window, my palm sailing over the air, and grasped every last bit of Cuba I could. Another first. **W**

For information about travel to Cuba and more images from the story, go to VirginiaLiving.com

