

Developed in the 16th century, Plaza Vieja in the heart of Old Havana is framed by brightly hued buildings that once housed some of Cuba's wealthiest residences. The bright-yellow building on the corner is Cerveceria Fabrica Plaza Vieja, one of only two craft breweries in Cuba.



Cuba ON THE Cusp



A member of the Cuban street band Los Mambisas plays guitar. The popular group can often be found performing in front of Merceria La Muñequita Azul, a 17th-century house of haberdashery that sits directly across from the Hotel Ambos Mundos in Old Havana.

PHOTO ESSAY BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

Now more than ever, Americans are experiencing some of the world's most far-flung destinations thanks to the ease and relative low cost of international travel. But one country—one so physically close at a mere 90 miles off the coast of Florida—has long remained out of reach for the average vacationer. But with the recent thawing of diplomatic relations along with the scheduling of commercial flights and cruises, the Caribbean island nation of Cuba is once again welcoming U.S. citizens.

According to the Cuban Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero, approximately 4 million visitors from around the world traveled to the island in the 2016, a 13 percent increase from 2015. The greatest increase came from U.S. tourists.

And the spectrum of those interested in traveling to Cuba is diverse, remarks Veronica Lothringer, National Accounts Manager for AmericanTours International. Many Americans have followed the country's transitions throughout their lifetime and have waited for the opportunity to visit. "There is also a younger generation that is excited to be part of the new Cuban culture, as well as families that want to see Cuba together as a cultural experience," she notes.

To visit Cuba now is to see a country in flux. It's a place where the clocks virtually have stopped for decades, but it's

slowly finding its way to the future. Its most recognizable feature is the plethora of colorful vintage American automobiles that rule the road, making Cuba a unique visual destination, especially for photographers.

Yet amid dilapidated colonial buildings that continue to creak and crumble, where '50s-era shop signs still hang over battered storefronts and residents fan themselves in open windows and doorways, you'll see hints of modernity: from crowds of locals slumped over smartphones and laptops in public Wi-Fi spots, to street vendors hawking light-up flying plastic toys and Mylar balloons, to tourists sipping mojitos and Cuba libres outside shiny, modern restaurants and bars.

"The city of Havana, with its classic convertible cars, cigar factories and local restaurants, is just one of the amazing places to see," says Lothringer. "But Cuba offers many wonderful destinations throughout the country, each unique to themselves and each offering interesting perspectives on Cuban history."

Jeremy Palmer, senior vice president for Tauck Land Journeys, adds, "In many ways, Cuba is 'the land that time forgot.' Its authentic, anachronistic charm isn't something you can experience just anywhere—and it's something that may or may not endure."



Built between 1926 and 1929, El Capitolio, or the National Capitol Building, on Paseo de Martí was modeled after the U.S. Capitol. Decades-old American cars and a few Russian Ladas ply the street, serving mostly as taxis and ferrying tourists around the island for \$30 per hour.



Havana's oldest square, founded in the 1520s, is now home to a daily secondhand book market. Alongside old, new and rare books in Spanish and English, tourists can find an array of unique souvenirs, old stamps and coins, Cuban movie posters, vintage cameras and military medals.



A family feeds pigeons in front of the Edficio Gómez Vila, the tallest building in Old Havana's Plaza Vieja. Located on the building's top floor is a camera obscura—one of just 74 worldwide—that provides live 360-degree views of the city.



No trip to Havana would be complete without a cruise along the Malecón, the seawall that separates the city from crashing waves. The five-mile-long stretch is filled day and night with fishermen, musicians, photographers, tourists and locals.



Opposite the Plaza de la Revolución, or Revolution Square, are the offices of the Ministries of the Interior. The façade features a five-story steel image of Che Guevara, accompanied by his motto "*Hasta la Victoria Siempre*" (Until the Everlasting Victory, Always).

The iconic sherbet-colored Colonial façades of Old Havana are an ideal photo opportunity. This scene can be found on Paseo de Martí, the dividing line between Centro Havana to the west and Old Havana to the east. Vintage 1950s vehicles add to the area's charm.





A typical street scene in Old Havana. Vintage automobiles are lined up in front of *casas particulares*, which are similar to bed-and-breakfasts. These private accommodations vary from single bedrooms in family houses to mini-apartments and villas. The blue T-shaped symbol on the signs signifies that these *casas* are for foreign tourists and meet certain standards, including having hot water and air conditioning.



Women dressed in traditional costumes wander the streets and plazas of Old Havana carrying baskets of fruit or with cigars in their mouths. They make their living posing for photographs. Payment is typically one CUC (Cuban convertible peso; equivalent to 1 U.S. dollar).



A worker at a tobacco farm outside Viñales poses for a picture.