



CUBA

CARIBBEAN SUN, SALSA BEATS AND RUM-SOAKED GLAMOUR

By Ashley Cultra, AHI Communications Manager

Cuba: The name conjures up images of cigar-puffing men leaning against classic cars, colonial buildings shedding layers of ice-cream colored paint and lean bodies oscillating to a rhythmic, hip-swaying salsa.

From vintage hints of its past splendor to its medley of charismatic citizens, Cuba's vivacity is simply palpable, and digging beneath its surface will uncover a truly exotic and compelling destination.

Since the socialist revolution in 1959 and the ensuing United States trade embargo, Cuba has been frozen in an era of bygone glamour. Cityscapes flaunt an eclectic mash-up of pastel-painted neoclassical facades, Soviet era concrete-block buildings and centuries-old plazas while flashy antique Chevrolets and Buicks rumble through the streets.

Though political change is reshaping many aspects of Cuba, the Caribbean island still clings to its cultural charisma and authenticity. Swinging salsa tempos are punctuated by the languid plodding of a horse-drawn carriage and passionate cheers from an impromptu alley baseball game. While gentrification is taking place to restore many of Cuba's piazzas and Corinthian-columned buildings to their former glory, the progress is painstakingly slow.

Cuba's capital, Havana, is a city bursting with musicality, revolutionary history and mojito bars. One glance at its Baroque porticos and sun-soaked Malecón and you will understand why famous faces like Hemingway and Ava Gardner called this city home.

Havana's historic district, Habana Vieja, was founded by Spanish colonists in 1519. Here, cobbled plazas teem with locals arguing about baseball. Men play dominos and flea markets hawk art, used books and local souvenirs. Nearby museums offer insight into Cuba's unique political and revolutionary history as well as ones dedicated to the country's artists and dancers.

Outside Havana's city limits lies a verdant countryside where the cadence of daily life is a little bit slower. Straw-hatted farmers drive oxen-drawn carts and rickety bicycles through tobacco fields, and families converse on front stoops while gently swaying to the strains of rumba music.

Though Cuba indeed flaunts a wealth of cultural riches and antiquated treasures, perhaps its greatest resource is the Cubans themselves. Friendly, genuine and hospitable, Cubans are quick to laugh and eager to share their unbridled passion for their music, their dance and their Caribbean island. Discover the real pulse of Cuban life by sharing a smile or a conversation with a local and truly enrich your Cuban experience.

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The Classics of Cuba

Cuba is essentially an open-air, rolling car museum. Gleaming chrome, polished tail fins and shining paint jobs of lemon yellows, Tuscan oranges, cotton-candy pinks and sunset reds send visitors into an almost eerie time warp. There are approximately 60,000 vintage cars in Cuba, and although they may be a hodge-podge of hand-built, improvised parts, most of them are still on the road today. Ingenious, proud owners have been able to keep their beauties running by culling pieces from household appliances, using parts from old tanks and converting many of the models to diesel by using European engines.

Not only do these pre-1959 American cars, including Chevrolets, Buicks and DeSotos, offer a stunning photographic appeal to the Caribbean country but they are also a visual expression of the decade's long embargo and a strong symbol of Cuban pride and nationalism.



The Finest Tobacco in the World

Cigars and Cuba are synonymous. Their enduring liaison became known to the world soon after Columbus landed in Cuba in 1492 and subsequently introduced cigars to Europe.

Like wine grapes, a cigar's unique flavor depends on the soil that the tobacco plant grows in. Connoisseurs of Cuban cigars praise tobacco grown in Cuba's far western region where the soil flavors and special microclimate create ideal conditions for superior tasting tobacco.

Three of the most legendary Cuban cigar brands are Romeo y Juliets, Montecristos and Fidel Castro's personal favorite, Cohibas.



Cuban Cuisine

Cuban food is simple cuisine. Many dishes begin with classic Caribbean ingredients that are then infused with elements from Spanish, Arabic and African cultures.

Ubiquitous to Cuban cuisine are black beans and white rice; fried pork, chicken and slow-roasted meats; and viandas, or root vegetables. Dishes are often simmered with basic seasonings such as garlic, cumin, oregano and onion - not too sweet and not too spicy. Deep-fried plantains, tamales, corn fritters and hearty Cuban black bean soup round out the island's belly-filling fare.

Caffeine lovers will delight in a Café Cubano or café con leche, strong coffee drinks that are usually served pre-sweetened. Cubans also love their rum and the no nonsense Cuba Libre and refreshing Mojito are cultural icons.



A PASSION FOR DANCE

Salsa is in a Cuban's blood. From sensual hip sways and hypnotic foot movements to infectious rhythms that snake through Cuba's streets from morning till night, Salsa's energetic poetry is ingrained in Cubans both young and old. Salsa and reggaeton bands lay claim to piazzas, street corners and paradors, anywhere that a crowd can gather to burn up the dance floor and enjoy robust camaraderie.

Salsa dance evolved in Cuba during the 1920s as other musical styles – Mambo, Yambú and Flamenco – were also spreading across the Caribbean. It blended together Afro-Cuban rhythms, elements of Spanish music and Cuba's own Son, a musical genre which relied heavily on percussion.

After sweeping through Cuba, American musicians became intoxicated with Salsa's rhythmic music and dance style and consequently brought the trendy beats back to New York.

A few elements of Salsa include:

- Salsa is usually a partnered dance with a lead and a follow.
- Salsa music generally has a beat of 4/4. There are three weight changes in each measure and the styles of Salsa are differentiated due to what happens during that extra beat.
- Cuban-style Salsa, or Casino, is characterized by an Afro-Cuban style of body movement in which the upper torso remains almost immobile, giving most of the movement to the hips.