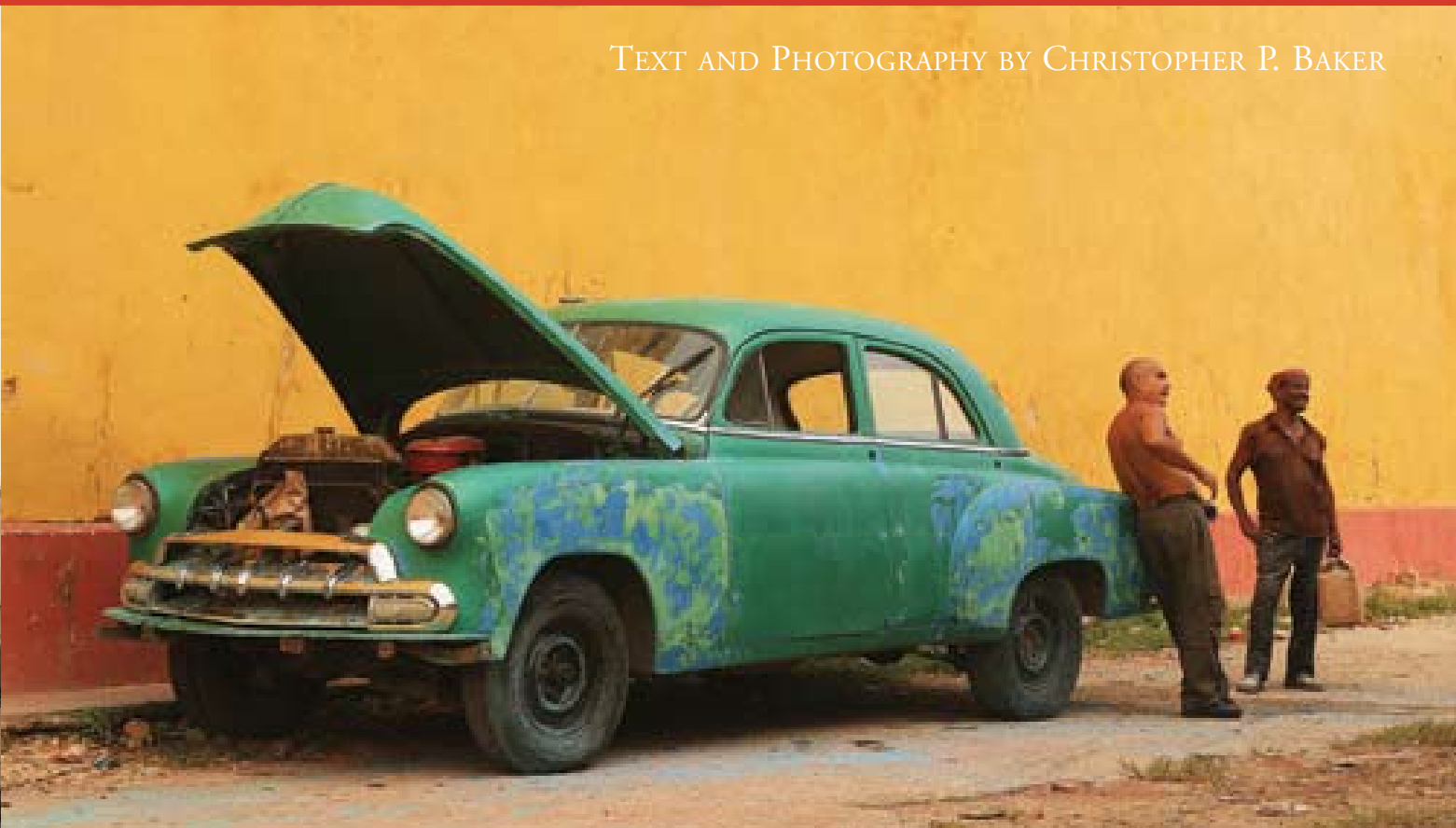


More insular than most islands, it's a land of antique towns, timeless landscapes, pristine beaches and hothouse culture. Now, a country drenched in Cold War-era nostalgia is poised on the verge of a full-scale, 21st-century tourist invasion. Let's see what we've been missing — and what we have to look forward to.

CUBA: LOST

and FOUND

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER



I'm in the mezzanine bar of Havana's chic, new Hotel Saratoga.



The hotel has been open barely a week, and I'm admiring its 21st-century sophistication, reminiscent of trendy digs in New York or London. The elevator doors part, and a muscular young man steps out. He's naked except for a towel around his waist, and water from the rooftop pool puddles up as he slips fish-like through the bar and into the lobby.

Slack-jawed, I look on as he saunters toward the front doors, intent, it

seems, on exposing himself to Cubans strolling along Paseo de Martí.

The hotel's desk clerk runs an intercept.

"Excuse me, sir," the clerk says respectfully in near-perfect English. "We don't allow guests in the lobby dressed in towels."

"Yeah, I know!" the guest, a *yanqui*, replies with disdainful dismissal.

I feel the yin and yang of déjà vu and premonition: The farcical scene recalls the BBC's hilarious hotel-based sitcom *Fawlty Towers*, even as it portends possible things to come as a U.S. tourist invasion hovers on a not-too-distant horizon.

Travelers visiting Cuba today do so at a fascinating historical moment.

The Democratic takeover of Congress in the U.S. has emboldened anti-embargo forces, and in January, a bipartisan bill was introduced to end existing travel restrictions to Cuba. While President Bush has promised to veto any such legislation, a Democratic victory in the 2008 presidential elections may virtually guarantee change. And then there's Fidel. When Cuba's octogenarian leader became incapacitated by a potentially fatal illness, his brother Raúl (Cuba's de facto new head of state) extended an olive branch to Uncle Sam.

Clockwise from left: Hotel Saratoga bar; Playa Flamingo; Havana's Hotel Nacional. Previous spread, clockwise from top right: balancing act at Playa Megano; stalled out; traveling salesman; limestone mogotes loom over tobacco fields at Valle de Viñales.

Possibility hangs in the air like the intoxicating aroma of *añejo* rum. After more than a decade of traveling to and reporting on Cuba, I'm suddenly feeling quite giddy.

While authorities in Florida prepare for a possible flood of émigrés fleeing Cuba after Fidel's demise, the island is preparing for a tidal wave in the other direction. A recent study predicts that five years after restrictions are



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lifted, 3 million U.S. citizens annually could be laying their towels on Cuba's sugar-fine sands.

Unbeknown to most U.S. citizens, tourism to Cuba is already huge. More than 2.3 million visitors arrived in 2006, second in the Caribbean only to the Dominican Republic's tally of 4.4 million. Canadians overwhelmingly lead the charge, followed by Brits. Visits by U.S. citizens, however, are currently restricted to Cuban-Americans visiting family (limited to one visit every three years), plus journalists, sports figures and a handful of other categories that qualify for licensed travel. Meanwhile, thousands of U.S. citizens end-run the restrictions — at the risk of a hefty fine — by hopping planes to Cuba via Canada, Mexico, Jamaica or Costa Rica.

What those millions of visitors find leaves them spellbound.

WITH ALL THE HOOPLA about politics, it's easy to overlook the sheer beauty of the place: the talcum beaches shelving into bathtub-warm waters of Maxfield Parrish hues; the bottle-green mountains and emerald valleys full of dramatic formations; the ancient cities with their flower-bedecked balconies, Rococo churches, and palaces and castles evocative of the once-mighty power of Spain. And, not least, on every block the "yank tanks" of yesteryear — Edsels, Hudsons and Kaisers — conjure up the decadent decades of martinis and *mafiosi*.

After thirty-odd visits to Cuba, I'm *still* enraptured as I watch José Pérez Pereiso swing his 1957 Dodge Coronet around and gun it, rumbling up the riverbank beneath the shadow of the Sierra del Escambray mountains in the town of Trinidad, four hours east of Havana. The car is a metallic-gray, green-blue peacock, as shiny after a bath in the river



Trinidad's 18th-century charm shines with structures like the Convent of Saint Francis of Assisi (top); a dance competition (above). Opposite: at a brew pub in Havana's Plaza Vieja.

Táyaba as the day it rolled off the factory floor in Detroit.

The passenger door swings open, heavy on its creaking hinges, and in I jump.

We set off, the Coronet's wedge-shaped tail fins slicing the hot air. I slide around on the slick, vinyl-covered bench seat while José, a lanky fellow with a handsome bronze face and jade-green eyes, shifts the gears with a push-button TorqueFlite selector.

We cruise through Trinidad in land-yacht luxury, a late-'50s luxe that generates in me a sense of *Twilight Zone* incongruity that echoes Trinidad's even more ancient mystique. The town was founded as one of Cuba's original seven cities in 1514. The entire city is a UNESCO World Heritage site, second in magnificence only to *Habana Vieja* (Old Havana), the capital city's remarkable core. The entire town of Trinidad is a lived-in museum, its cobbled plazas entirely restored. Its setting is no less remarkable: Sitting astride a hill, the town of some 40,000 people catches the breeze and gazes out over the Caribbean against a backdrop of the verdurous Sierra del Escambray.

Out the car window I watch a sunburned French tourist scurrying through the main plaza.

"*Mon dieu!*" she exclaims, raising her camera toward a toothless old Cuban poised on a donkey, adding another mantle to the multi-textured layers of a *temps perdu*.

That's Cuba. *Everything* looks so nostalgic.

The island has a flavor entirely its own: an amalgam of colonialism, capitalism and communism. When walking Havana's streets, I feel like I'm living inside a romantic thriller. I never want to sleep for fear of missing a vital experience. It's intoxicating, still laced with the sharp edges and sinister shadows that made Ernest Hemingway want "to





MOGOTES LOOM OVER A BROAD VALLEY SUFFUSED WITH THE SUNLIT SOFTNESS OF PISSARRO'S LANDSCAPES.



stay here forever." Cuba was a salacious environment in which to pursue writing, a lusty and libertine place. It still is.

I settle myself at the bar of La Bodeguita del Medio, Hemingway's favorite watering hole half a block from Havana's antique cathedral. Troubadors move among thirsty *turistas* as I savor the proletarian fusion of dialectics and rum. Seduction, however, keeps creeping in. I sip a *mojito*, the rum mint julep that Hemingway brought out of obscurity. It's strong and, as a sultry Cubana stares into my eyes, I feel a glimmer of the "other charms" to which Hemingway had succumbed.

LIKE MOST CUBAN CITIES, Havana, the wealthy, thoroughly modern city of pre-revolutionary days, is corroded to the point of dilapidation. Spared the wrecking ball during five decades, however, Habana Vieja is being rescued from years of neglect under the guidance of Eusebio Leal Spengler, the charismatic, official city historian. Today scores of heretofore-decrepit colonial structures gleam afresh like confections in stone. Priority is given to edifices with income-generating tourist value. Structures of the most historical and physical value are reserved for museums; second-level structures are for hotels, restaurants, and other commercial entities run by a self-financing business, Habaguanex. It's a model being copied island-wide, including in Camagüey, "The City of Plaza" six hours east of Havana in the center of Cuba. It is being restored plaza by plaza, though — unbelievably — relatively few tourists ever pass through it. The same goes for Remedios, another bewitching 17th-century gem, surrounded by tobacco fields in the coastal foothills of Villa Clara province.

Cities throughout the 780-mile-long island seem like they've sidestepped the currents of time. One of my off-the-beaten-track favorites is Baracoa, the original



This page from top: Friends for life in Trinidad; raising cane; legendary musician Faustino "El Guayabero" Oramas Osorio. Opposite: Pure oxen power in Valle de Viñales (top); full steam ahead.

Cuban city founded in 1512 by Diego Velázquez. Spread-eagled below El Yunque, a dramatic flat-topped mountain that floats mysteriously above the Bahía de Miel (the Bay of Honey), it's a setting fit for a Hollywood epic: reason enough to visit. Isolated and individual, Baracoa resembles a real-life Macondo, the setting for Gabriel García Márquez's surreal novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It looks and feels antique; its little fortresses and narrow streets are lined with venerable wooden houses, rickety and humbled with age, their red-tiled eaves supported on penurious timber frames.

AH, YES, THE SCENERY!

Cuba is the least mountainous of the Greater Antilles. Its landscapes are soft and calming, epitomized by sensual waves of

chartreuse cane fields undulating like a great, swelling sea. Royal palms are everywhere, towering over the countryside like columns of petrified light. Quintessentially Cuban vistas attain their most dramatic beauty in Viñales, a two-hour journey west of Havana. Mogotes — sheer, freestanding knolls the size of skyscrapers — loom over a broad valley suffused with the sunlit softness of Pissarro's landscapes. Two *au courant* hotels hover atop the vale's southern scarp, giving stupendous views over quilted tobacco fields where ox-drawn ploughs comb the cinnamon soil into furrows.

The majority of Cuba's most sublime settings are served by at least one hotel. Nonetheless, more than three quarters of Cuba's hotel rooms are in all-inclusives concentrated in three beach resorts: Varadero, Guardalavaca, and Cayo Coco. These and most of Cuba's other spectacular

Your First Cuba Trip

Finally, the travel restrictions lift. It's time to pack your suntan lotion and hop the Straits of Florida to sip *cuba libres*, savor a stogie and discover everything else we've been missing out on all these years. A 10-day itinerary will suffice to touch the must-see sights.

DAYS ONE TO THREE

Budget at least three days for **Havana**. Concentrate your first day exploring the cobbled plazas: **Plaza de la Catedral** with its Baroque cathedral; **Plaza de Armas**, setting for the **Museo de la Ciudad** (City Museum); and lovely **Plaza Vieja**, where **La Taberna** is a great venue for sipping chilled beer alfresco. To discover whether Cuban cigars really are rolled on the thighs of dusky maidens, take a guided tour of the **Fábrica de Partagás** tobacco factory. Nearby, the **Capitolio**, Cuba's former congressional building, shines after a complete restoration and is now a museum. Crossing **Parque Central**, head for the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes**, a world-class fine-art museum. To get the Cuban government's take on the revolution, stroll down Agramonte to the **Museo de la Revolución**, then end your day with a sunset stroll along the **Malecón**. On your final day, roam the tree-shaded streets of the **Vedado district**, breaking for a mojito at the garden bar of the **Hotel Nacional**. Pick up a rental car and drive out to **Plaza de la Revolución**, then to **Museo Ernest Hemingway** in the suburb of San Francisco de Paula. Tonight,

a sizzling cabaret at the **Tropicana**.

■ **Hotel Saratoga** (hotel-saratoga.com) Chic and sumptuous contemporary hotel on the edge of Old Havana.

■ **Hotel Raquel** (habaguanex.com) Art-deco gem with modern appointments in the heart of the old city.

■ **Casa de Jorge Coalla** (havanaroomrental.com) Only one bedroom, but this *casa particular* has gracious hosts and an unbeatable location in Vedado.

DAYS FOUR AND FIVE

Rent a car and head west to **Pinar del Río** province via the north-coast road, stopping en route for a hike and overnight at **Las Terrazas** mountain resort. Then, on to **Viñales**. After exploring the valley and **Cueva del Indio** (take the boat tour of this underground lake), get off the beaten track to find **Finca Pinar San Luís** near San Juan y Martínez, where Alejandro Robaina — Cuba's unofficial ambassador of cigars — offers guided tours of his legendary tobacco farm. If you have time, continue west to **María la Gorda**, a superb setting for scuba diving in the **Bahía de Corrientes**. Whale sharks frequent the warm waters.

■ **Hotel La Moka** (lasterrazas.cu) Not the eco-lodge it claims to be, but a charming neo-colonial hotel nonetheless.

■ **Hotel Los Jazmines** Renovated, mid-priced historic hotel overlooking the Valle de Viñales.

DAYS SIX AND SEVEN

Return to Havana and let the Autopista (Cuba's sole freeway) slingshot you east to Jagüey Grande. Turn south here for **Playa Girón** — the infamous Bay of Pigs — where the **Museo Girón** and a nearby crocodile farm (at Boca de Guamá) are worthy attractions. Anglers and nature lovers might linger for world-class fishing and birding in **Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata**. Overnight in **Cienfuegos**, a port city with fine colonial buildings.



Hotel Saratoga

Next day, follow the southern coast road to **Trinidad**. Here, steep in the colonial mystique for two days and then head into the **Sierra del Escambray** and hike to cascades deep in the forest (excursions are offered by Gaviotatours). Time permitting, take a steam-train ride into the **Valle de los Ingenios**. Don't fail to dance to traditional music at Trinidad's **Casa de la Trova** or practice your salsa moves in the **Disco Ayala**, inside a cave.

■ **Hotel Union**, Cienfuegos. Gracious centenary hotel with period furnishings and a fine restaurant.

■ **Iberostar Gran Trinidad** A deluxe Spanish-run newcomer and Cuba's finest urban hotel outside Havana.

DAYS EIGHT AND NINE

Follow the winding road north over the Sierra del Escambray and drop into Villa Clara province. A stop in **Santa Clara** is de rigueur to visit **Monumento y Museo de Che**, where Che Guevara is interred. Then on to **Remedios** to stroll around the cobbled plazas (at Christmas, the town explodes in an orgy of fireworks fever). Round out your itinerary with two nights at **Cayo Santa María**: It has water sports, and the angling and scuba diving are excellent.

■ **Meliá Cayo Santa María** (solmelia.cuba.com) All-inclusive beach resort with water sports and other amenities.

DAY TEN

The Circuito Norte will take you back to Havana via the cities of Cárdenas and Matanzas.

YOUR SECOND TRIP: EASTERN CUBA

Make **Santiago de Cuba** your base for exploring Oriente: the eastern provinces. The city requires two days, including a visit to **Parque Histórico del Morro** for the nightly cañonazo (cannon-firing) ceremony. Hire a car for day trips to the **Basilica del Cobre** and **Parque Baconao** (day three), then set out for **Baracoa** (days four and five). En route, detour to the **Zoológica Piedra** outside otherwise desultory Guantánamo. Your 10-day, round-trip itinerary should also include the gorgeous beaches and pre-Columbian sites of **Guardalavaca** (days six and seven), plus **Holguín** (day eight) for its colonial plazas. Visit Fidel Castro's birthplace at nearby **Sitio Histórico Birán** (day nine) before heading back to **Santiago**.

■ **Hostal San Basilio**, Santiago de Cuba. A quaint, eight-room conversion of a colonial mansion close to the main plaza.

■ **Hotel El Castillo**, Baracoa. An erstwhile castle has metamorphosed into a fine hilltop hotel with a good restaurant and gold-star views.

Recommended Reading

■ *After Fidel: The Inside Story of Castro's Regime and Cuba's Next Leader*, Brian Latell

■ *Cuba Classics: A Celebration of Vintage American Automobiles*, Christopher P. Baker

■ *Cuba Diaries: An American Housewife in Havana*, Isadora Tattlin

■ *Mi Moto Fidel: Motorcycling Through Castro's Cuba*, Christopher P. Baker

■ *Travelers Tales: Cuba*, Tom Miller (ed.)



Remote beaches like **Playa Periquillo** on the **Cayo Santa María** islet, a **UNESCO Biosphere Reserve**, remain spectacularly uncrowded.

beaches lie along its north shore. A necklace of coral jewels — the Jardines del Rey — are beaded in a great line that parallels the coast for almost 300 miles. Few of the cays are inhabited or even accessible: Together they are among the least-disturbed of Cuba's terrains — or were. Cuba's future is to be written on these frosted sands.

Motorcycling through the isle a decade ago, I rode out to Cayo Coco, connected to the mainland by a man-made tombolo stretching out to sea like a laser beam. My room in the Hotel Tryp boasted a well-stocked mini-bar, CNN and HBO on a Sony TV, and a marble bathroom big enough for a troupe of the hotel's cabaret showgirls. A beach with sand like dusted diamonds unspooled as far as the eye could see in each direction.

Just when I thought Cuba's sands couldn't get any whiter or its seas any more perfect a combination of greens and blues, I arrived at Cayo Santa María. Taking off my sunglasses, I was blinded by the glare of the sun on the sand, dissolving into a lagoon of startling hues. The silence was absolute, save for the muffled drone of the surf breaking on the outer reef. There were no personal watercraft, no water skiers, no volleyball games on the beach — nothing but powdery sand and coral reef and turquoise ocean stretching off into the hazy beyond. I was seeing Cuba through the eyes of a conquistador.

Oh, how things have changed.

Lassoing the trend for all-inclusive resorts, the Cuban government has already built the Sol Cayo Santa María, Meliá Cayo Santa María and Meliá Las Dunas in joint Spanish-Cuban ventures (one quarter of Cuba's entire inventory of rooms is in 24 hotels managed by Spain's Sol Meliá chain). More mega-resorts are underway. Alas, no Cubans are permitted to sully this island paradise. Nor Varadero. Or Cayo Coco. In fact, all the main beach resorts are off-limits to Cubans. The Cuban government has a schizoid attitude toward the mingling of Cubans and tourists. It prefers groups of tourists over individuals and tries to erect barriers between visitors and Cubans as much as possible. However, since the island's current crop of 44,000 hotel rooms is barely sufficient to keep up with existing demand, legal *casas particulares* (private room rentals) help take up the slack while providing an opportunity to experience the real Cuba alongside the Cubans themselves. And tourists are free to go wherever they wish.



Shopping for rum and cigars.

AND THEN THERE ARE THE HARDSHIPS ... YOU'LL FALL MADLY IN LOVE WITH THE COUNTRY WHILE BEING THANKFUL YOU DON'T HAVE TO LIVE IN IT.

In many ways, Cuba for tourists has changed beyond recognition since my initial visit in 1993. The government (which owns all hotels) has been polishing its style. The trend is toward more refinement. Most of the once-shabby hotels have been spruced up (at the very least, all now have toilet seats). Charming boutique hotels are appearing. A national bus service, Viazul, guarantees tourists prompt service aboard imported buses. And there's no shortage of Toyota and Mercedes taxis, nor the latest-model Hyundais and Audis for rent.



Horseplay at the Tropicana. Opposite: Strumming in solitude at the Fondo de Bienes Culturales (top); guarding Catedral de la Habana.

"WE'RE CONSCIOUS THAT Americans are very demanding," Meise Weis Graibe, President of Habaguanex, tells me. "They want quality."

"We're upgrading our hotels to guarantee American visitors the level they expect," she adds as we sip delicious chilled beer at the Taberna de la Muralla, a recently opened brew pub in Havana's 18th-century Plaza Vieja.

Cuban tourism officials are clearly looking forward to the end of U.S. travel restrictions, not least because in 2006 tourist arrivals fell 3.6 percent. Political uncertainty over Fidel Castro's health, an outbreak of dengue fever and the fact that Cuba is no longer a bargain all combined to reverse an explosive tourism trend. Most hotels are now vastly overpriced by competitive standards in, say, the Dominican Republic or Jamaica. Little headway has been made in improving moribund food and desultory service. And tourists' complaints are usually met with a shrug of the shoulders. It's enough to leave exasperated visitors wondering if Basil Fawlty really is running the show.

And then there are the hardships faced by the Cubans themselves: the shortages and often heart-rending poverty, the meddlesome bureaucracy, the stifling government control of people's lives. You'll most probably fall madly in love with the country while being thankful you don't have to live in it.

An invasion of U.S. tourists should prove a godsend for the impoverished Cubans. Then again, the isle may become spoiled.

It doesn't take great imagination to envision how Cuba could again become, in W. Somerset Maugham's piquant phrase, "a sunny place for shady people." The country's demimonde, bubbling just beneath the surface, is just waiting for someone to marshal it. Conditions are already severely testing the Cubans' admirable faith in cooperation, a situation exacerbated by the tourism boom, which creates an inverted economy: Bellhops earn more than surgeons. Miami's Cuban-American exiles dream of possible McDonald's franchises on the Malecón while a new breed of market-savvy Cuban political leaders seeks a homespun paradigm: They want to channel economic growth while preserving social benefits and avoiding

upheavals that could topple the government. The future remains full of uncertainty.

To the international visitor, the frustrations and uncertainties need be no more than a slight inconvenience, and perhaps a call to compassion. The pluses of traveling there far outweigh the minuses.

Above all, Cuba is a bewitching and unique otherworldly domain. Exhilarating sensations engulf visitors to this most beguiling of Caribbean isles. Set foot one time in Havana, and you can only succumb to its intangible, enigmatic allure. It is impossible to resist the city's mysteries and contradictions. Then there's the art scene, perhaps unrivaled in Latin America. There are saucy cabarets to enjoy, such as the Tropicana, the open-air extravaganza now in its seventh high-kicking decade of stiletto-heeled paganism. There's Santería and salsa, mojitos and *cuba libres* to savor — and the world's finest cigars to smoke fresh from the factory as you rumble down the highway in a chrome-spangled '55 Cadillac to the rhythm of the rumba on the radio.

Back in the Hotel Saratoga, the wayward yanqui in the towel is deftly edged toward the elevator by the wily desk clerk. I'm left in peace to sip my mojito and ponder what the future holds for this unexpectedly haunting realm full of eccentricity, eroticism and enigma.

