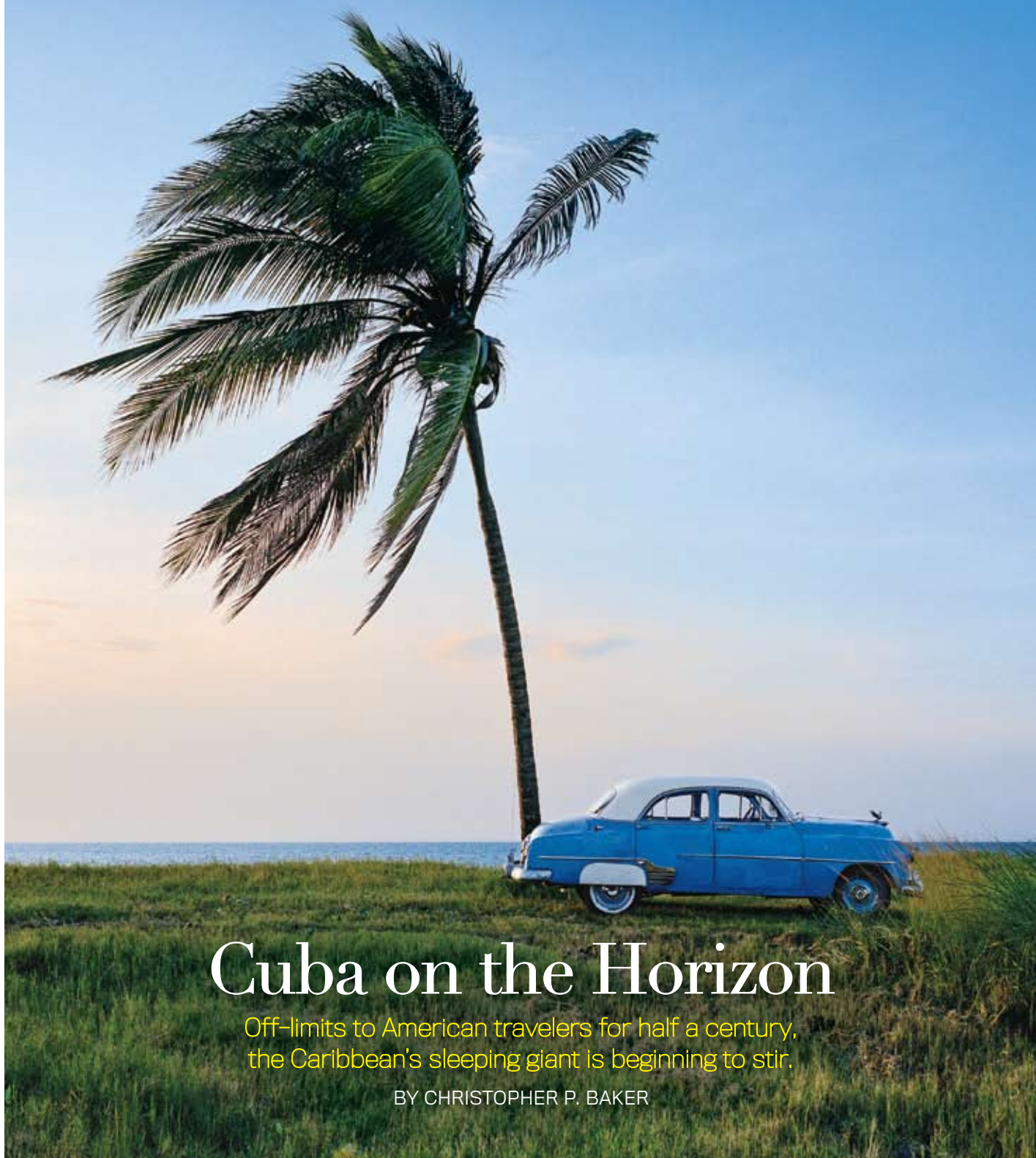


CARIBBEANLIFE

[*The personalities, lore and ecology of the region, revealed*]



Cuba on the Horizon

Off-limits to American travelers for half a century,
the Caribbean's sleeping giant is beginning to stir.

BY CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER



CUBA VERDE
Domelike mogotes of eroded limestone define the Viñales Valley on Cuba's western end.

A Cuban lady once scolded me: “Why does your government not like us?” she asked. “They are too hard on us!” Then she kissed my cheek and thrust a bag of ripe tomatoes into my hand.

It's like that all over the island. Cubans you've met only moments before embrace you, call you “amigo” and invite you into their homes. They pass around rum and beer. Friends and neighbors arrive. Hands are extended; strangers hug you warmly. It's hard to believe that the United States government's rigid Trading With the Enemy Act is applied to these genuinely warmhearted people. How often have I laughed — almost cried — as I've danced with this enemy of ours?

Enemy?

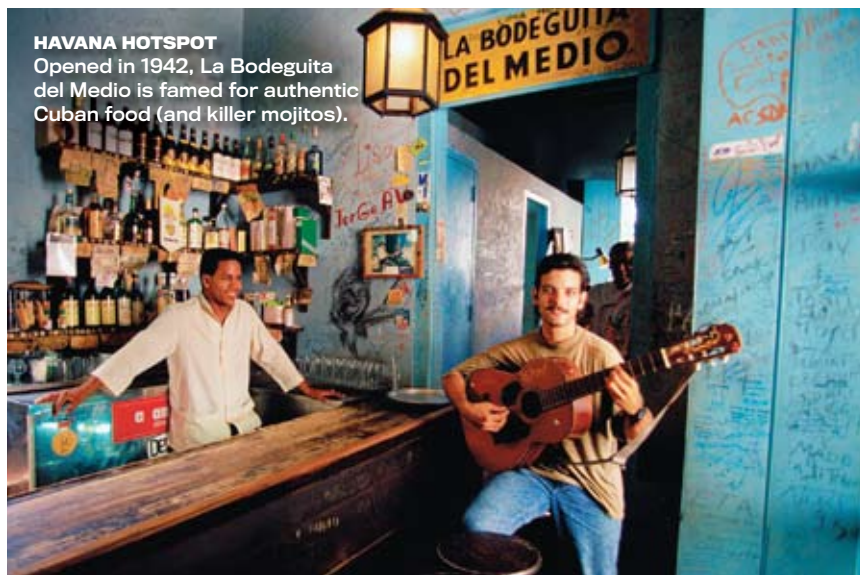
ONLY 90 MILES SEPARATE KEY WEST, Florida, and Havana, but the Straits of Florida remain the widest moat in the world. After Fidel Castro organized an armed revolt in 1959 that resulted in the ouster of Cuba's U.S.-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista, the island nation has been off-limits to American businesses and citizens (except for politicians, journalists and researchers). Before the revolution, the capital city of Havana

was a place of intrigue and tawdry charm. Even now, half a century later, the whiff of romance and conspiracy is still in the air; it's remarkable how much of Cuba's surreal demimonde lingers on.

President Obama's announcement that Cuban-Americans would be given free rein to visit family members in Cuba narrowed the distance for them — but what about the rest of us? After almost two decades of visiting and reporting on the Republic of Cuba, I'm dismayed that most Americans still can't set foot on this profoundly fascinating and fulfilling island. Forget the politics.

Imagine talcum-fine beaches rivaling the best of Mexico's Riviera Maya or the Dominican Republic's Punta Cana. The turquoise waters shelter virginal coral reefs — and sunken Spanish galleons — of unrivaled allure. Ox-drawn plows still work palm-shaded fields where the world's finest tobacco grows. Colonial cities aching with pathos whisk visitors back through the centuries, and creaking *cacharros* — Studebakers, Kaisers and Edsels — add to their *Alice in Wonderland* peculiarity.

Alas, while leaders in the anti-Castro Cuban-American community



HAVANA HOTSPOT
Opened in 1942, La Bodeguita del Medio is famed for authentic Cuban food (and killer mojitos).

welcomed the President's gesture, they promised to fight to prevent efforts to permit all American citizens to visit Cuba, on the grounds that doing so equates to supporting a hostile dictatorship. Meanwhile, bipartisan support is growing in Washington (even from senior Republican Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) to restore the right of travel to Cuba without discrimination based on national origin.

infrastructure will surely be stressed to breaking. For one thing, the country's modest fleet of rental cars is already often booked solid. And in high season, the current crop of hotel rooms is barely sufficient to keep up with demand (2.3 million foreign visitors arrived in 2008, the vast majority of whom are beach-package vacationers from Canada and a host of European countries, including England, Spain and Italy). The country will have to double its hotel capacity to

resorts, with more opening every year; Sandals and SuperClubs have been present for years in Varadero, Cuba's main beach-resort town. So too have well-established European brands such as Sol Meliá, which manages two dozen Cuban resorts, representing a fifth of the island's hotel rooms.

Meanwhile, the Cuban government has been penning new agreements with foreign partners aimed at broadening the country's deluxe appeal. In November 2008 the Carbonera Club launched as the first residential-tourism project since the revolution, funded by sales to foreigners of private villas and condos. The project will cost about \$400 million and will include a five-star hotel, a marina and a yacht club, an 18-hole golf course and 720 private apartments and villas. At least a dozen similar residential resort complexes are in the works along Cuba's scintillating north shore.

Despite this steroidal surge, Cuba is years away from catching up to its Caribbean neighbors when it comes to offering value-priced, mass-market luxe. Desultory service, lackluster food and poor management are ubiquitous complaints at even the most luxurious of Cuba's hotels. That's not likely to change anytime soon, as the principles of communism and customer service mix like oil and water. And foreign hoteliers aren't allowed to manage their own properties either; government-appointed Cuban co-managers pull the strings. Prestige brands such as Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton will surely want a piece of the Cuban market, but not unless they can maintain full control of their resorts. For these reasons, Cuba's repeat business is already far below that of competing Caribbean destinations capable of delivering a tourism experience to international standards.

OF THE MANY FOND MEMORIES I have from the 30 or so trips I've made to Cuba, there's one that really typifies the country's otherworldly, romance-novel charms. I'd gone to Havana's Tropicana nightclub after the show to pick up my girlfriend, Mercedes, who worked there as a *figurante*, or dancer. To my astonishment, she appeared

**SANDY SWEEPS,
CLASSIC CARS**
Check out Daiquiri Beach, namesake of the popular cocktail. Opposite: A typical Havana street scene straight out of the 1950s.



Cubaphiles are gushing over the possibility that U.S. restrictions on travel might soon be lifted. Cruise lines are salivating at the prospect of berthing in Havana. Tour operators are gearing up for a possible rush. And Cuba itself is hastening preparations for a Yanqui invasion. A recent study by Reuters predicted a flood of 1 million visitors from the United States during the 12 months after travel restrictions are lifted. Within five years, that number is expected to grow threefold. And an International Monetary Fund study released in 2008 concluded that the relaxing of U.S. travel restrictions to Cuba would increase tourism to the Caribbean, including neighboring islands, by 11 percent. A rising tide floats all boats.

But will Cuba be able to endure the flood of visitors? The existing tourist

meet the prime-time rush. Ostensibly, relief is on the way: Last year the Cuban government announced plans to build a whopping 30 new hotels by 2010 (10 of them in Havana), increasing the room count by 22 percent, to 56,000 (more than Jamaica's 30,000 rooms but short of the Dominican Republic's region-leading 70,000). My most recent visit in May, however, suggests that the country is way behind schedule in meeting its ambitious expansion goals.

Nonetheless, speculation that the country's tourism infrastructure will buckle under the weight of a stampede of Americans seems misplaced. I suspect the Cuban government will opt to regulate the influx — by limiting aircraft landing rights and perhaps even introducing a visa system — until it can expand its capacity. Cuba already has several world-class all-inclusive

dressed entirely in white, with a turban on her head. Copper and bronze amulets glinted on her arms, and she wore many necklaces made with colorful beads. Mercedes had just been initiated as a follower of the Santería religion.

She took my hand, and we hailed an illegal taxi. Winding our way through the dimly lit streets of the city, a policeman leaped into the path of our jalopy and frantically waved down our driver. A man lay bleeding in the street. The policeman wanted to bundle him into the car and commandeer it for a trip to the hospital.

“Ay, mi madre!” Mercedes exclaimed. She leaned forward and spoke through the driver’s window. The policeman looked aghast, then waved us on and ran off to look for another car.

“What did you tell him?” I asked, astounded.

“I am not myself,” she replied. “I am



St. Teresa, patron saint of the dead. If he had put that man in the car, I might have killed him.”

EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT SEEING Cuba now, before the incursion of Yanquis ruins the very things — like my dreamlike street scene with Mercedes — that make the place so unique. American tourists won’t spoil Cuba’s organic eccentricity, although lifting the entire embargo might eventually extinguish the country’s stage-set

exoticism. But this huge island, with much of its urban infrastructure on the verge of collapse, is screaming out for a rejuvenating shot of mega-investment. And gentrification will surely add a vivacity that was stifled when the socialist revolution triumphed five decades ago.

Change is inevitable. I hope these changes won’t take too great a toll on Cuba’s inherent eccentricity, but it’s a risk I’m prepared to accept for the right of all U.S. citizens to smoke a cigar and hire a 1950s Cadillac to explore this unexpectedly haunting realm — so close to home, yet so far away.

Christopher P. Baker is the author of Moon Handbooks Cuba and Mi Moto Fidel: Motorcycling Through Castro’s Cuba, which details his 7,200-mile journey through the country. To read his last Cuba feature, including suggested itineraries, go to caribbeantravelmag.com/cuba. **CT+L**

St. Maarten

bring your
appetite for
life



800-786-2278
www.vacationstmaarten.com

Embrace Calm.

Unkink your body. Soothe your spirit. Book your next vacation getaway at the Westin St. Maarten Dawn Beach Resort & Spa, where the mind and body are always renewed.

- Renew your spirit in the luxurious Hibiscus Spa
- Enjoy breathtaking views in one of our exquisite restaurants
- Try your luck in the on-site casino

For more information, please call 1-800-937-8461 or visit westin.com/stmaartenspecials.

This is how it should feel.™

THE WESTIN

ST. MAARTEN
DAWN BEACH
RESORT & SPA

STARWOOD PREFERRED GUEST®

Rates from \$149

*Offer valid 6/1/09 - 9/6/2009. Based on availability. ©2009 Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. All rights reserved. Westin is the registered trademark of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, INC, or its affiliates.