



Hotel Raquel



Hotel Ambos Mundos



Hotel Santa Isabel courtyard

HAVANA REDUX

A unique collection
of boutique hotels adds
to Old Havana's allure

CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER

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STROLLING ABOUT Habana Vieja (Old Havana), I had an exhilarating sensation, as if Ernest Hemingway were walking beside me through the cobbled streets of this most literary of Cuban destinations. We stumbled together, the great author and I, to the **Hotel Ambos Mundos**, conveniently located just minutes from Hemingway's two favourite bars. On and off throughout the 1930s, the great novelist lay his head in Room 511, where the plot of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* filled his thoughts. After the revolution, the hotel was turned into a hostel for Ministry of Education employees, but has since been spruced up as a tourist hotel. I took the rickety 1920s Otis elevator with pull-back metal gate to the fifth floor to peek into Room 511, preserved as a museum, complete with Hemingway's typewriter and an old Spanish edition of *Don Quixote* on the night table.

The Ambos Mundos is just one of the many notable historic buildings in Habana Vieja that plays up yesteryear, comprising a remarkable hotel collection unique in the world.

Once a stronghold for treasure en route to Spain, Habana Vieja is now a 350-acre repository of castles, cathedrals and columned mansions – including 144 buildings dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Following its UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1982, an ambitious project was begun to preserve and restore the most important colonial ensemble in the Americas.

Priority was given to edifices with income-generating potential and the most significant structures are being turned into museums. Others become hotels and restaurants operated by **Habaguanex**, a state-owned company formed in 1994 to generate the income for financing the restoration. To date, a score of venerable palaces, mansions and convents have metamorphosed into boutique hotels furnished in a fashion that best evokes their colonial character.

They range from simple Spanish-style *tabernas* to former palaces with crystal chandeliers and velvet sofas evocative of old-style luxury. The smallest hotel in the portfolio is **Hotel Conde de Villanueva** with just nine rooms. The largest is the **Hotel Telégrafo** with 63 rooms. In between are 17 other small boutique properties – each as distinct as a fingerprint. With a focus on refinement, a new hotel or two is spiffed up each year and the plan is to eventually have 3,000 hotel rooms in the heart of the city (from the current 900), with an eye to the day when the U.S. travel ban will be lifted.

"We're conscious that North Americans are very demanding. They want quality," Meise Weis Graibe, president of Habaguanex, told me as we sipped delicious chilled beer at the **Taberna de la Muralla**, a brewpub in Havana's 18th-century **Plaza Vieja**. "We're upgrading our hotels to guarantee North American visitors the level they expect," she added.

Weis Graibe led me along cobbled streets that echoed with the footsteps of *conquistadores*. After three blocks, we arrived at what was once a thriving, now time-worn, Jewish neighbourhood. I stared up at the extravagant bas-relief

Walking Havana's streets, you get the sense that you are living in a romantic thriller.

façade of the **Hotel Raquel** – a dramatic example of art nouveau styling. The building began life as a bank in 1905 – at a time when impoverished Jews from Eastern Europe were flooding into Cuba (most Jews fled Cuba after the revolution; today, fewer than 2,000 remain). It looked the part. The palatial lobby was a forest of marble columns, and priceless Tiffany lamps gleamed in the sunlight pouring in from a massive stained-glass skylight above, from which ornate chandeliers patterned after the Star of David dangled. The beautiful bank-to-hotel conversion has created a temple to Jewish tradition and faith. Richly illustrated passages from the Old Testament adorn the walls. Rooms are named for Biblical matriarchs and patriarchs. And the restaurant even serves kosher food, such as borscht and latkes.

"We've chosen to focus on restoring old hotels and creating new ones that cater to specialized tourists," Weis Graibe said. "This one attracts cigar aficionados."

She pointed to the **Hotel Conde de Villanueva**, a conversion of the mansion of the Conde de Villanueva standing four-square at the corner of **Calle Mercaderes** and **Calle Lamparilla**. Striding between giant brass-studded carriage doors, I entered a spacious lobby lounge that opened onto a courtyard at the back. Caged birds trilled a greeting from the open courtyard – a fantasy of tropical foliage – around which the hotel's nine intimate rooms are centred. The mezzanine level, where household slaves once lived, is now occupied by a cigar shop and lounge.

I did a double-take passing along **Calle Brasil**. Was that a monk in a dark brown habit standing at the entrance to the **Hotel Los Frailes**? No, it was the bellman. This intimate 22-room hotel, in the former mansion of the fourth Marquis Duquesne, plays on a monastic theme, reflecting its proximity to the **Convent of Saint Francis of Assisi**. The entire staff dresses in habits! Flute music – courtesy of a quartet playing in the lobby – drew me in. Timber roof beams. Stained-glass windows. Wrought-iron chandeliers. Heavy wooden furnishings. All evoked an ecclesiastical mood, echoed by the soothing tinkle of a fountain in the otherwise silent courtyard.

Habaguanex's flagship hotel is the 27-room **Hotel Santa Isabel**. Opened in 1997, this former 18th-century palace of the Count of Santovenia enjoys an unrivalled location on **Plaza de Armas**, the cobbled main square and epicentre of Havana's history. The suite here has welcomed a who's-who of famous guests, including President Carter, Jack Nicholson, Robert Redford and Sting. Furnished with period pieces, the Santa Isabel embodies the definition of colonial grandeur, transporting guests back in time.

Still, I couldn't imagine sleeping there.

Don't get me wrong. Walking Havana's streets, you get the sense that you are living in a romantic thriller. You don't *want* to sleep for fear of missing a vital experience. The city's atmosphere is intoxicating and is still laced with the sharp edges and sinister shadows that made Hemingway want "to stay there forever." And, in a way, 'Papa' never left. As I sipped a mojito at the Hotel Santa Isabel's patio bar it was easy to imagine the sun-bronzed novelist striding across the cobbled plaza, white mane and beard haloed in tropical light, hoary chest showing beneath khaki shirt, on his way for a sugarless double daiquiri with his friends. ▀