



*Rumba rhythms are playing on the radio* as we cruise along the potholed streets of Santiago de las Vegas in late-'50s land-yacht luxury. The town is a time capsule, and Eugenio O'Hallaran's jet black 1959 Cadillac Fleetwood, its tail fins slicing through the hot Cuban air on this mid-spring afternoon, is one of its treasures. Eugenio, a spry 77-year-old, chats away like a parrot, interrupting himself to honk at the sexy *muchachas*, who smile back and blow saucy kisses.

"*Mira, señor,*" says Eugenio, taking a moment from other distractions to demonstrate how the Caddy's power seat—a slick, blood red Naugahyde bench on which I have been sliding around—still rises and descends with an audible hum. I am amazed, if only because this is Cuba, where keeping a car running requires a combination of providence, perseverance, and a genius for eclectic invention. ➔

# Cuba's AMERICAN IRON

Tens of thousands of the U.S.-made cars imported prior to the trade embargo are still on the road. In pre-Castro Cuba, these *yanqui* classics served as status symbols among the wealthy. Today they offer constant reminders of the country's past—its prosperity and its malaise.

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*Havana increasingly resembled a U.S. city as its large, financially comfortable middle class developed a proclivity for all things American, especially the latest coupes and sedans.*

Eugenio is guiding me on a photographic hunt for classic autos, though his assistance is not needed. Every street features a parade of Eisenhower-era American iron. "That one's *mienda*," says Eugenio, employing a profanity to describe a bullet-nosed 1950 Studebaker Champion that we pass. "We call them *Stu-desgracias*"—disgraces. He guns the 390-cubic-inch V-8, and the Fleetwood roars along the road, which shimmers with microwave heat. Then the old man's soulful eyes widen with pleasure. He has spotted a 1957 Ford T-bird convertible parked in the shade of a group of tall and tousled royal palms. Nearby squats a red 1949 Dodge Wayfarer, and a 1951 Hudson Hornet sits beneath a faded circa-1950

Coca-Cola sign that swings on rusty hinges in the breeze eddying in off the sea. The cobblestoned streets of Santiago de las Vegas, lined with once-glorious colonial edifices, are littered with corpulent Chevys, chrome-laden Chryslers, and other voluptuous dowagers that embody the sensational styling of Motown's glory years.

The big-boned Cadillacs, however, draw my attention. They are everywhere, wallowing through the streets on sagging tires. In his book *Driving through Cuba: Rare Encounters in the Land of Sugar Cane and Revolution* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), author Carlo Gébler writes about rummaging from one end of the isle to the other in search of a



While the majority of Cuba's American cars serve merely as means of transportation, some, including this 1957 Dodge Custom Royal Lancer, are restoration showcases.

## Cuba's American Iron

Despite more than 40 years in which not a single model has been imported, Havana boasts more Cadillacs per capita than any other city in the world.

Right: Eugenio O'Hallaran's 1959 Cadillac Fleetwood; below: a 1950 Cadillac Series 75.

1957 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham. The pillarless, handbuilt sedan with a brushed stainless steel roof and Dagmar bumpers (named for a buxom blond actress) was the most sumptuous Cadillac ever made. It even had a built-in atomizer filled with Lanvin perfume. Only 704 Eldorado Broughams were ever produced, and each cost an eye-popping \$13,074—more than a Rolls-Royce of the time. Gébler's quixotic quest proved fruitless, yet it remains likely that at least one Cuban Brougham is awaiting discovery. After all, on the eve of the revolution, no other city in the world boasted as many Cadillacs per person as did Havana, and despite more than four decades in which not a single Cadillac has been imported, this is still the case.



*The oldest Cadillac in Cuba* is a 1905 4-cylinder Model D that now resides in Havana's Depósito del Automóvil. The U.S. military administration (1898–1902) paved the way for its arrival when it laid blacktop on Havana's pot-holed, mud-puddled streets following Cuban independence. Over the next two decades, an appetite throughout the world for Cuban sugar enabled the island to become the wealthiest of the tropical nations. At the peak of the boom in 1920, the year of the “dance of the millions,” sugar



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Eugenio O'Hallaran  
and his '59 Fleetwood

export revenues more than doubled, from \$455 million to \$1 billion. The bubble burst soon thereafter, but Cubans had already developed a taste for deluxe *yanqui* autos.

Cuba was only a 96-mile ferry ride from Key West, so the costs of shipping the autos from the United States were low, and because the peso and dollar were of equal value, no problems of foreign exchange existed. In addition, Cuba had fallen under the sway of Madison Avenue, which treated the island as an extension of the U.S. mainland, though the advertisements, of course, were in Spanish. U.S. auto manufacturers sponsored radio programs and broadcast their message of "North American prosperity within everyone's reach" to a population eager to emulate the American Dream. American celebrities played their part, inspiring an impressionable public to buy cars as glamorous as the stars who rode in them. Ernest Hemingway set the tone, swinging through Havana in his sleek V-12 Lincoln Continental convertible, accompanied by such illustrious friends as Ava Gardner, Gary Cooper, Marlene

Dietrich, and Errol Flynn, en route to El Floridita for his daily *papa dobles* (sugarless double daiquiris).

Havana increasingly resembled a U.S. city as its large, financially comfortable middle class developed a proclivity for all things American, especially the latest coupes and sedans—possessions by which the status-conscious defined themselves. Among these residents was a dashing 24-year-old with a taste for stylish suits and the limelight. Following his graduation from the University of Havana law school in 1950, Fidel Castro Ruz was gifted a sparkling Pontiac Chieftain Eight DeLuxe sedan by his father.

*Cuba continued to be deluged* with American autos for half a century, culminating in the late 1950s, when no country other than the United States boasted so many Studebakers, DeSotos, and Cadillacs. During the 1940s, imports of U.S. autos increased fivefold, and that volume doubled by 1955, when Cuba recorded 125,000 registered passenger cars, the vast majority of which were built in

