

Lunchbreak

Travel

Havana hotspots fire the passions

Forget Hemingway and cigars, Cuba's capital is hip again

BY JAMES BROWN

STARING out across the Parque de la Fraternidad from the rooftop pool bar of Havana's five-star Hotel Saratoga, it appears that the city has it all.

Far in the distance is the giant monument at the Place de la Revolution. To the right is the Capitol Building, in front of which hundreds of Cubans are limbering up for a marathon. Across the park, taxi drivers lounge against their classic Fifties American motors with their Russian engines.

I had come to Cuba after watching five minutes of *Our Man In Havana*. It was in black and white, the sound was down and Alec Guinness was in a bar watching a rotating wall of dancing girls.

I arrived with other people's preconceptions, the name of a guy who might help out and a booking at the Saratoga. I like a hotel, like this one, with internet access and a

How to get there...

Exsus Travel (020 7292 5050, exsus.com) has four nights' B&B in Havana at the Hotel Saratoga, including return flights with Virgin Atlantic and transfers from £899pp

rooftop bar and pool that serves lobster salad for lunch. Other people might head to cigar and chocolate factories or Ernest Hemingway's old haunts, but I was happy to sunbathe on the roof by day and explore by night.

Havana is raw enough to provide spirit, culture and adventure, but organised enough to accommodate retirement-age uber-tourists dressed in massive T-shirts and bulky trainers.

My first impression was of a curious pride in Eastern Bloc-style buildings. As we drove in from the airport I was looking at a beautiful woman by the roadside when the driver diverted my attention. "That," he announced rather grandly, "is the dental school."

The second was of how little you see of Fidel. Apart from a few slogans promoting Committees For The Defence Of The Revolution and a friendly "Go Well" from Castro, there's little to suggest we're in one



Haven in Havana: the five-star Saratoga Hotel and, below, one of the "amazing" acrobatic showgirls from the Tropicana

of the last great communist states. My guide is Romulo Sans, editor of *The H*, probably the most stylish city guide in the world. We had met at La Guardia, a gem of a restaurant hidden in a huge crumbling stucco-fronted mansion where rooms house families behind iron grilles.

Up the stairs there's a fading Pronouncement Of The Revolution from Fidel before you are into tiny rooms decorated with religious iconography and pictures of past diners including Robert De Niro and Jack Nicholson. The tuna ceviche and fried sweet potato

— is excellent and the first of a string of places to eat that Romulo recommends. At one end there's the hip and lavish, at the other there's suburban places such as The Paladar El Buganvil, serving fish, rice and yukka beneath the shade of sprawling bougainvillea. Everywhere there appears to be music clubs and fashion shows but Romulo drags us to the home-grown music scene.

At the Karl Marx theatre we see underground jazz musicians, then we're off to a house by the Air Force Museum

where the new Cuban superstar X Alfonso is playing. From one extreme to another, Romulo books us a table at the Tropicana, surely the most amazing display of flesh, acrobatics and suggestive dancing I've ever seen.

Again we jump styles down to the Malecon, the walkway along the seafont. Here you'll find The Hotel Riviera, a monument to art deco. Next door is a dusty street market where Che Guevara T-shirts, political posters, leather cigar holders and antique Revolution cigarette card annuals can be bought cheaply.

Along the path billboards display George Bush as a bloodthirsty vampire terrorist. Half the billboards look like Socialist Workers' Party artwork, the other half like Bollywood movie posters. It's the same clash of ideologies as old Berlin, Checkpoint Charlie in the sun.



Romulo Sans of The H entertainment bible offers tips to Havana good time

EAT
El Temple Basque chef Arkaix Etxarte does wondrous things to seafood.
Open daily 12pm-12am. Prices: £15-£25, Ave del Puerto Esq, A Narciso Lopez, Habana Vieja, 00 53 866 8807

Paladar la Guardia Famous as the setting for the film *Strawberry And Chocolate*, this is a place of gastronomic excellence that pulls in the crowds. Dishes include medallions of salmon with bacon and spring onion sauce and tuna with sugar cane in coconut glaze.
Open daily 12 noon-4.30pm. Prices: £12-£17, Concordia No. 418, E/ Gervasio y Escobar, 00 53 866 9047

NIGHTLIFE
La Zorra y el Cuervo Entering through a London phone box, you descend to the holiest of Cuban jazz. Chucho Valdes, right, Wynton Marsalis and Canela play here.
Open daily 9.30pm-2am, Sunday 2.30-7pm. 23 E/N Y O, Vedado, 00 53 833 2402

DRINK
Bar Bacardi This quiet art deco-style bar is regularly frequented by the cognoscenti.
Open daily 9am-9pm. Edificio Bacardi, 261 Ave Belgica, Habana Vieja, 00 53 862 9271



ALISON TYLER

Travel Bites

WISH YOU WERE HERE?

Aah, the palm trees, sun-drenched skies and majestic exotic domes — don't you want to be there? But where is this dream location? Eastbourne. That's right, this is the latest advertising campaign for the British seaside resort, which launches next week. But before you scoff, Eastbourne was



voted best UK resort last year by the travel industry at the Group Leisure awards, it has one of the UK's few city Blue Flag beaches (with double deck chairs for couples) and it hosts both the prestigious pre-Wimbledon ladies' tennis, which this weekend features Belgian star Kim Clijsters, as well as the Davis Cup in July. In October there's a festival of food called Feastbourne, and next year a new £8.5 million cultural centre with two art galleries and conference exhibition space opens. And with the Grand Hotel having been refurbished — it even has a branch of Mirabelle! — maybe it's time you looked twice at Eastbourne. For details, visit eastbourne.com

A REALLY SUITE DEAL

Paris in August is blissfully quiet and by far the best time to visit the museums, enjoy the café society and to pick up a great hotel deal. We've teamed up with independent hotel website Travel Intelligence to save you 50 per cent when you stay at some of the city's most stylish suites during August, including Murano Urban Resort, the Raphael Hotel and Hotel de Sers. The Suite Deals offer is also available at other hotels across Paris, such as the St Germain boutique hotel Le Senat, where suites are £180, a saving of 30 per cent. For further information and to book, visit travelintelligence.com/suitedeals.php

PSST

● Beatles fans should start to form an orderly queue now: the latest buzz from Malmeson Liverpool is the Ringo Suite. Opening in late September, the former house of Ringo, below, has been dismantled brick-by-brick and transported to the hotel so guests can effectively stay chez Starr. For information visit malmeson.com

● This summer the Great Eastern Hotel is offering weekend rates from only £100 a night. There will also be hairdressers from hot local salon Pimps And Pin-ups to get you ready for a big night out in nearby Spitalfields or Shoreditch. See great-eastern-hotel.co.uk

● Rumours abound that hip US brand W hotels has found a London location. Could it be the site of parent company's Sheraton Park Lane Hotel, or the Le Meridien on Piccadilly?



MOSCHINO.

SAMPLE SALE

Thursday 15th June 10am – 8pm
Friday 16th June 10am – 7pm
Saturday 17th June 10am – 6pm

Venue:

Stable UK (entrance via blue door)
24 Neal Street, Covent Garden, WC2H 9QW
Tel: 020 7318 0500

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