

# HalogenLife

Your Life. Well Spent.

Travel | Objects | Shelter | Culture | Family | Productivity | Guides | Sites

## Cuba Gears up (Optimistically) for Upscale Travel

BY SHIRA LEVINE, THURSDAY SEP. 17, 2009

TRAVEL, CUBA, RESORTS

« Return Share It



Once upon a time, we tried (unsuccessfully) invading Cuba with CIA-trained Cuban exiles. These days it seems we're entertaining a different approach: Invade with tourist and business dollars. After many years of fits and starts, it finally seems Cuba may once again be a destination for Americans. President Obama recently paved the way, further easing restrictions on travel to Cuba amidst a fifty-year trade embargo. New policies make it easier for Cuban-Americans to visit family members (and bring back goods), though many travel restrictions are still in place for non-Cubans. With an influx of Americans (especially business people) flying directly to the tiny island via charter flights, there is a

growing demand for luxury accommodations. Hotels groups, like [Melia](#) and [Barcelo](#), along with various resorts around and along the Cuban Riviera, are getting "developmental" by amping up amenities (always in concurrence with Fidel Castro's government of course). Perfect for those who can afford it.

Indeed there's a lot of gearing up for bigger and better in Cuba: UK-based [Escencia Hotel](#) has dibs on bringing Cuba its first golf resort: The Carbonera Golf and Country Club for an estimated \$400 million. The plan includes an 18-hole golf course, boutique hotel, 800 apartments, 100 villas and three restaurants, all by 2011. The Veradero beaches have long been the choice destination among Cuba's elite. But with resort development on the two tinier islands of Ensenachos and Santa Maria we're sensing this could be a case of the old "Acapulco today, Riviera Nayarit tomorrow" as the hotspot. (Riviera Maya is so 2005.) Concierge companies like [Cuba Luxury Villas](#) add further exclusivity and comfort for highfalutin visitors.

When I traveled in Cuba, I could not, for the life of me, find detailed maps of the cities and towns I visited. Asking for directions to locals was the only way, and it generally cost me an American dollar, or three. (Travel with lots of singles and don't spend them all on the ladies or men at the Copacabana: You'll have a hard time getting a Cuban to break a \$20 bill for your \$1 tip.)

Getting your hands on the Cuban peso is equally challenging. Everything has two prices. The low Cuban price and the inflated *extranjero* (tourist) price. For example, eating ice cream has long been a popular pastime in Cuba. At Coppelia Ice Cream Parlour, locals and tourists stand in two different lines and pay two different prices. Cubans walk away with two small cones and *extranjeros* with one.



Those who venture from



four-star hotel stays for *casa particulares* enjoy a more authentic (although technically illegal) experience by staying with a Cuban family you are paying directly (as opposed to the government). There are restaurant *particulares* too, and for that matter everything in Cuba is particular. With ration boards applying to everyone, be



prepared, no matter who you are, to have some whims go unmet.

(That sometimes includes *El Jefe* himself. A Canadian friend once shared a story where she saw Fidel's posse pushing an out-of-gas car to the gas station she was at when out popped *El Comandante*. When the island is out of gas, so is Mr. Castro.)

Patience and a good attitude reward you with everlasting memories. My personal favorites were in Havana: Savoring mojitos *al fresco*, along the immaculately manicured lawn of the classic [Hotel Nacional de Cuba](#). The staff, dressed like Rat Pack cool cats, was effortlessly friendly without being pushy, sporting honest, ear-to-ear smiles that seem extinct in most chic cities. Perched atop a majestic cliff overlooking the violent night sea, it was easy to forget where I was, and I found myself effortlessly romanticizing every little detail.

Away from places like Hotel Nacional exists a more realistic Havana. I don't recall seeing air conditioning units in any of the peeling pastel painted apartments, explaining why people of all ages hang out on stoops: playing backgammon, listening to music, skipping rope or just sitting around because, well, it's hot and Cubans don't go inside until it's time for bed. My favorite spot was anywhere along the Malecón—a cement wall separating the road from the beach sand. Young (and old) lovers entwine along the Malecón laughing, drinking and holding true to a reputation of being among the most passionate people in the world. All while gazing out into the dark sky and darker waters towards Florida, so close, yet so far away. On the other side of the malecon, relics of Detroit's golden era—1950s Packards, Buicks, De Sotos, Pontiacs, Studebakers, and Fords—cruise along, muscular bronzed arms jutting from rolled-down windows.

#### INSIDER TIP:

No matter what your own country's relationship is with Cuba, U.S. policy for non-Cuban nationals entering Cuba from the U.S. is the same. No one gets their passports stamped by Cuban officials. Instead, everyone receives what's known as a "floating visa": A paper inserted into your passport, stamped on arrival and retrieved on departure. No clue as to what kind of floating records the government maintains with this method, but keep in mind it hasn't been Cuba restricting Americans all these years: Cubans would love for you to spend your dollar in their country.

*Shira Levine is an experienced travel writer who has covered everything from post-revolution Chiapas to "Gringolandia" Costa Rica. She's indulged in the wines of Argentina, sampled cevapcici along coastal Croatia, and luxuriated in Dubai and Iceland. Yet she still must fight the urge against becoming The Ugly American. Her column will help you avoid the pitfalls of loud T-shirts and even louder complaining, while uncovering the latest and greatest chic travel opportunities.*

## Related Stories

[Adopt a Whale Through Wailea Beach Villas, Maui](#) (DECEMBER 30, 2009)

[The Ugly American: Cruise Ships](#) (DECEMBER 29, 2009)

[Montage Beverly Hills Celebrates Anniversary With Specials](#) (DECEMBER 29, 2009)

## Reader Comments (1)



AG  
September 18,  
2009

The bird's relatives were under the table awaiting their chance to be the next visitor's meal, but I remember the condensation on the water glass. The bird was salty even for my southern palate. I can't believe I had enough restraint not to drink the water. I reached for it three times...don't drink the water...don't want to be airlifted to US and then go to prison...don't drink the water.

