

# The other face of Cuba



**Havana getting too crowded? Santiago de Cuba and Baracoa in the eastern half of Cuba will offer a respite away from the crowds**

Lin Yanqin

As I tugged my backpack out of the boot of my taxi, bare-chested children dashed past me, chasing a football through narrow, dusty streets. Women, some of them with their hair still in curlers, wandered out of their homes to chat with one another.

A man pushed a large cart of small, bright yellow mangoes past me – much to the delight of two boys, whose father bought them one mango each and they messily ate the fruit on the spot.

Santiago de Cuba's hot, gritty streets may be synonymous with revolutionary history, but the city wears its history lightly.

As my taxi chugged to my casa particular (government-sanctioned homestays), I took in the laid-back scenes of everyday life – a sharp contrast to the more frenetic pace of Havana some 850km away. But the city's gentle pace and unassuming vibe belied what it has to offer.

After all, Santiago de Cuba was where the late Fidel Castro and his comrades launched their socialist revolution in 1953, forever changing their countrymen's lives.

It was also where Jose Martí, a national hero venerated as the father of Cuban independence from the Spanish, was buried after he was killed in battle in 1895.

Compared with Havana, there were fewer crumbling yet-palatial neo-classical buildings, wide avenues and no touts offering cigars and rides in shiny, spiffed-up vintage Chevrolets.

But without the postcard-perfect gloss, it was easier to sink into the rhythms of everyday life.

**NOT ONE, BUT TWO REVOLUTION SUPERSTARS**

Santiago de Cuba's historic neighbourhoods are picturesque, much of them steeped in the patina that makes them so curiously appealing – once-vibrant exteriors faded to dusty pinks and blues, ivy creeping out of cracked walls, the elegant swirls of cast iron grilles casting shadows on boarded-up windows.

The city is compact and walkable if you don't mind the heat. A lovely place to stop and take in the views is

the century-old Padre Pico ([www.santiagodecubacity.org/en/parks-streets/padre-pico-street.html](http://www.santiagodecubacity.org/en/parks-streets/padre-pico-street.html)) stairs that lead to the picturesque Tivoli neighbourhood, built under the watch of one Mayor Emilio Bacardi Y Moreau – yes, of the Bacardi alcohol empire.

From the top of the steps, one stares down a long slender street that runs all the way to the sapphire-bued sea sparkling in the distance.

More plaza than park (and also a Wi-Fi hot spot), it is dominated by the imposing Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption on one side and the Moorish-influenced house of Diego Velazquez ([www.santiagodecubacity.org/en/architecture/museo-diego-velazquez.html](http://www.santiagodecubacity.org/en/architecture/museo-diego-velazquez.html)) – the Spanish conquistador, not the painter – on another.

Velazquez founded seven towns, including Havana, to mark his brutal conquest, which saw much of Cuba's indigenous population massacred.

Some three centuries later, more blood was shed as Cubans began to rise against their Spanish overlords, culminating in the War of Independence in 1895.

This was led by Martí, a poet, philosopher and revolutionary fighter whose premature death at 42 only amplified his power as a symbol of Cuba's struggle for freedom.

Crossing the city to its north-west edge, one will find the serene Santa Ifigenia cemetery, where the grand edifice marking his final resting place looms over a sea of ornate tombs. An elaborate changing of the guard ceremony takes place every 30 minutes.

The national reverence for him was encouraged by Castro, who not only evoked Martí's name repeatedly in his socialist revolution, but also made sure that he would be interred nearby in the same cemetery after he died – a move that sparked dismay among his dissenters.

Nonetheless, Castro's grave has drawn long lines since his death in 2016.

To take in more Castro history – and myth-making – I visited the infamous Moncada barracks, where Cuba's socialist revolution made its inauspicious debut.

On July 26, 1953, a young Castro and his brother Raul attempted a coup that ended in their arrest and

the deaths of several of their compatriots.

The ensuing trial, however, gave Castro the platform to make his four-hour "history will absolve me" speech, effectively kick-starting his campaign to transform Cuba into a socialist state amid a tidal wave of change.

The barracks now houses a small museum, with most of the signage in Spanish. Next, I made for the imposing Plaza de la Revolución ([www.santiagodecubacity.org/en/architecture/antonio-maceo-square.html](http://www.santiagodecubacity.org/en/architecture/antonio-maceo-square.html)) at the entrance of the city, unmissable with its 23 gigantic machetes rising dramatically out of the ground, flanking a massive statue of General Antonio Maceo – another independence hero and a son of Santiago de Cuba no less – on horseback.

It is an monument of heroic proportions designed to inspire, and it did.

**AN ISOLATED GEM**

If Santiago de Cuba is a trip down Cuba's revolutionary lane, then Baracoa is a journey into the country's natural wonders, many of them accessible even to the most casual of recreational hikers.

Baracoa is the site of Cuba's first colonial settlement.

Battered by hurricanes that come roaring over the gorgeous sea on one side, and flanked by verdant jungles and rugged mountains on the other, Baracoa has a wild feel utterly different from the rest of the country.

It is a scenic five-hour bus ride from Santiago de Cuba, the highlight being the 60km-long La Farola road, a lashed piece of Cuban civil engineering that winds through the peaks of the Cuchillas de Baracoa mountain range.

An instantly recognisable landmark of Baracoa is El Yunque ([www.baracoa.org/geography/el-yunque.html](http://www.baracoa.org/geography/el-yunque.html)), a distinctive flat-topped mountain that appears much higher than its 570m.

A short but sweltering hike will take you to the top to survey the region's undulating greenery, lush as a carpet, threaded by silvery rivers.

Meanwhile, Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt's rich forests are home to one of the world's smallest tree frogs, which is about the size of your littlest fingernail.

You can try to spot Cuba's national bird, the Cuban Trogon, with its bright blue, white and red feathers, like the colours of the national flag.

The Unesco World Heritage site is considered one of the most important in the region because of its rich



A vintage car (above) on a street off Parque Cespedes in Santiago de Cuba.

People crossing streams in the Yumuri gorge (left). PHOTOS: LIN YANQIN

endemic. Within its modest range lies a staggering 900 plants unique to Cuba alone.

The Yumuri river is also a popular destination. Tours will drop you off at the Boca de Yumuri, a picturesque bay where the river opens into the sea.

Boats then take you upstream into the serene gorge, dropping you off a short way in. From there, you can venture as far as your legs (or guide) take you, on forested trails punctuated by sparkling water holes.

You are likely to share these experiences with the growing number of local and international tourists venturing to the region, especially when you join organised tours. These tours are inexpensive by international standards, provide convenient transport and are led by professional licensed guides.

But wanting a break from guided tours, I decided to hire a friend of my casa owner to take me around on the back of his motorcycle for

my day trip to the Yumuri. Riding on the back of the bike under the wide open sky, I finally felt like I was having a proper adventure.

We zipped through green hills dotted with palm trees and past small cocoa farms, which you can visit and buy Baracoa's signature export: chocolate.

Once past the hills, you are greeted by the impossibly blue sea, the colours of the water shifting from turquoise to azure in the blink of an eye as the sunlight dance on its surface.

Curving bays of sand beckoned and I fought the temptation to surrender my hiking plans for a languid afternoon spent swimming and napping on the beach.

Nevertheless, we proceeded to the Yumuri, where my guide introduced me to his taciturn acquaintance, who spoke no English but knew the area like the back of his hand.





The Padre Pico stairs in Santiago de Cuba.

He also had a keen eye for spotting tiny wildlife: hummingbirds the size of my thumb and diminutive snails with brightly coloured shells called polymitas, which are endangered because of poaching.

We hiked further into the gorge than most groups did, until there were no other voices to be heard, save for the sound of our breathing and the rustling of leaves and dirt beneath our feet.

Around us rose the walls of the gorge, creating an almost protective silence, keeping the noisy, modern world at bay.

Slowing down and taking my time, I was able to let tiny details of the day sink in. Even now I can recall the heat rising off the road underneath the motorbike, the sun beating down on my neck, the cool, salty stickiness of the sea breeze, the green, velvety smell of the forest.

And always, the ocean, in more shades of blue than my eye could comprehend, its beauty maddeningly impossible to capture in photographs.

**REALITY BITES**

Cuba's time-warp charm is a blessing and a curse: Although it draws tourists, it is also the result of American-led trade sanctions and stifling poverty.

The official monthly salary is US\$25 (S\$33.40), although those in the business of catering to tourists can earn US\$200 to US\$300 a month.

All Cubans enjoy free education and healthcare, but many also depend on ration coupons for necessities — soap, toilet paper and eggs — and a look around these shops reveal bare shelves and people shaking their heads over shortages.

These were sobering thoughts as I wandered through the cradle of Cuba's socialist dreams. But Santiago de Cuba has not forgotten about the good life, as exemplified by its Casa de la Trova.

Such state-run "troubador" houses can be found in nearly every large town or city in Cuba, and are considered the drivers behind the endurance of Cuban folk music. Santiago's Casa de la Trova and

Patio de Artex attract both tourists and locals alike with the intricate rhythms of son, a genre of music and dance that originated in the east of the country.

You sit down planning to simply watch the action, but you come under the music's spell and are powerless to resist strangers pulling you to your feet for a dance. It is a scene straight out of a Buena Vista Social Club fantasy.

Then the song ends and you call it a night and walk home, nodding to the friendly couple relaxing on their patio next door as you pause to dig for your keys, the scent of ripe mangoes rising from a nearby garden.

Life in Cuba is no fantasy, but sometimes it feels like it.

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\* The writer is a former journalist who spent five months traveling (mostly) solo in Latin America last year, but still cannot speak Spanish.



**GETTING THERE**

KLM and Air France fly from Singapore to Havana with one stop in either Amsterdam or Paris, with a total flight time of 22 hours (excluding stopover wait time).

Alternatively, those travelling to the United States (in New York City, Fort Lauderdale or Orlando) can consider making a detour to Cuba via JetBlue ([www.jetblue.com/flights/cuba](http://www.jetblue.com/flights/cuba)).

Most tourists travel through Cuba on buses run by Viazial ([www.viazial.com](http://www.viazial.com)), the state-owned bus operator. Buses depart Havana for Santiago de Cuba daily. The journey takes 12 to 13 hours.

Cubana ([www.cubana.cu](http://www.cubana.cu)) flies from Havana to Santiago de Cuba daily. The journey takes about 90 minutes and a round-trip ticket costs about 230 euros (S\$364).

Buying Viazial bus tickets can be stressful for the Type A traveller. Tickets online sell fast, so they must be booked well in advance.

Tickets can also be bought at Viazial terminals, but practices vary — some terminals refuse to sell tickets more than 30 minutes before the bus is due to leave, while others were happy to sell me tickets days in advance.

**TIPS**

Big hotels can be found in Havana and Varadero, but elsewhere, casa particulares, a system of letting locals rent out rooms or homes, are the default accommodation.

Numerous websites allow you to make online bookings before your arrival, such as [casaparticulardecuba.org](http://casaparticulardecuba.org).

Airbnb and Booking.com have also gotten in on the action, but accommodations from these sites are more expensive.

In Cuba, there are two local currencies in circulation. Tourists need be concerned with only one of them, the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC), which is pegged to the US dollar (that is, 1 CUC is US\$1).

You have to buy your CUCs in Cuba and, for Singaporeans, the best currency to bring with you is the euro, which is accepted at all money-changers.

Do not bring US dollars, as exchanging greenback incurs an additional fee.

When making day trips, ask around to see if there are collectives (shared taxis) going to your destination. These depart when they fill up.

They are much cheaper than private taxis and way more entertaining. The experience provides a good opportunity to practise your Spanish and make new friends — of both Cubans and fellow tourists.

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For reservations, visit [www.gustoitaliano.com.sg](http://www.gustoitaliano.com.sg)

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