



In Cuba the day begins at night, when the locally made rum flows and the air is filled with the sounds of salsa, rumba and mambo. From the street below, we can hear laughter and the pulsating rhythm of bongos and guitars. There's something irrepressible about the Cuban people. The majority exist in poverty, crippled by the continuing US trade embargo and the withdrawal of Soviet financial aid in 1989. The buildings are dilapidated and the shelves in the shops are bare. This is a country where Lux soap is a luxury and pork is a treat on a par with lobster.

Yet the people are sassy, vibrant and proud. They have so little, but live so fully. It makes our way of life seem embarrassingly extravagant by comparison.

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry but Cuba, a communist republic, remains relatively unspoilt by commercialism. This is largely due to the lack of American influence — you won't find a McDonald's or Nike store on every corner. In fact, the only remnants of Americana left in Havana — huge 1950s Cadillacs, Chevrolets and Studebakers known as *cacharros* — have become prized possessions.

The basis of communism is that everything is shared, and this is something the Cubans do very well. For example, government vehicles are legally required to pick up hitchhikers if they have room. With a population of just over two million, Havana relies on public transport. One of the strangest sights in the city has to be the 'camel' — a bus which consists of a lorry and two cabs roughly welded together. But it does the job.

With limited time on our hands, we want to cut quickly through the city traffic, so we barter for our fare and take a *cocotaxi*, which is basically a motorised tricycle with a bright yellow fibreglass shell like a coconut. It's a bumpy but fun way to have a good look around the city.

Havana is an appealing mix of grandiose and derelict. Many buildings look close to collapse, with peeling façades and rusting ironwork, but there is a huge renovation process taking place to restore many of the older buildings.

While most homes may be in desperate need of a coat of paint, they are spotlessly clean inside. If you're interested in getting a real insight into Cuban life, many families rent out a room for around £10-20 a night. Others open up their homes to serve traditional Cuban food. *Paladars* are family-run restaurants which seat no more than 12 and offer ➤

COOL CUBA

Unspoilt and uncommercialised, Cuba is a must-see destination if you love music, dancing and chilling out Caribbean-style. By **Jacqui Paterson**



WHERE TO STAY

LUXURY Hotel Nacional

de Cuba, Calle 21 & O, Vedado, is a grand old building overlooking the sea with landscaped grounds and swimming pools. A double room costs from £100.

MID-RANGE Hotel Inglaterra, 416 Paseo del Prado.

Situated in the heart of Havana, this is the oldest hotel in Cuba. A double room costs around £60.

BUDGET Casa particular. Rent a room in a private Cuban home and you'll only pay £10-20 per night. For homes offering this service, visit www.particularcuba.com.

Hotels in Havana can be booked through Gran Caribe (020 8959 9933/www.gran-caribe.com).

WHERE TO EAT

LUXURY El Patio, Plaza de la Catedral. Dine alfresco at the foot of the cathedral while listening to a live salsa band. An average meal costs from £9-15 per person.

MID-RANGE La Bodeguita del Medio, 207 Empedrado.

A Havana institution. A meal costs from £5-9 per person.

BUDGET Ask at your hotel for directions to the nearest *paladar*. You can eat well for around £3-6 per person.

dishes such as pork or chicken with black beans and rice and fried plantains for about £3, which is much cheaper than the state-run restaurants and cafés.

We head to Havana's largest cigar factory — Romeo y Julieta — to see how those world-famous stogies are made. Inside the dingy building is a huge room lined with rows and rows of desks, each filled with workers folding, squeezing and rolling sheaves of dried tobacco leaf into cigars. To ensure the workers don't get bored, two men sit at the front of the room reading a book or newspaper into a microphone. The factory store offers hugely discounted cigars. A box will set you back around £145 but, as you'd pay £500 in England, it's still a bargain.

We decide it's time to say farewell to Havana and discover more of Cuba. We start with a day trip to the Vinales Valley. This lush tropical forest makes a striking change from the city. We stop to explore the Indian Caves. For around £3, you can see the stalactites and stalagmites formed over thousands of years and take a boat across the subterranean lake.

The following day we drive to Cienfuegos — about four hours southeast of Havana — on the shores of the Caribbean. The warm waters are perfect for scuba diving and there are plenty of stunning coral formations, including the Notre Dame — a coral column almost six metres high. This is also a great spot for water-skiing, sailing and kayaking.

From Cienfuegos, it's an hour's drive to the town of Trinidad. Here, the strong Spanish influence is still evident in the lavish homes of the former sugar-mill owners. We visit the Romantic Museum, just off the main square, where for around £1.80 you can tour a restored colonial home. Afterwards we head to an authentic mill in Sugarmill Valley, where we see how a stem of sugar cane is crushed into liquid sugar using a large wooden press — and lots of elbow grease.

Next we head back to Havana via the southern coast and the Bahia de Cochinos, or Bay of Pigs. It's well worth a visit to the Playa Giron Museum (entry around £1.20), which documents the unsuccessful American attempt to invade Cuba in 1961 using CIA-trained expatriate troops.

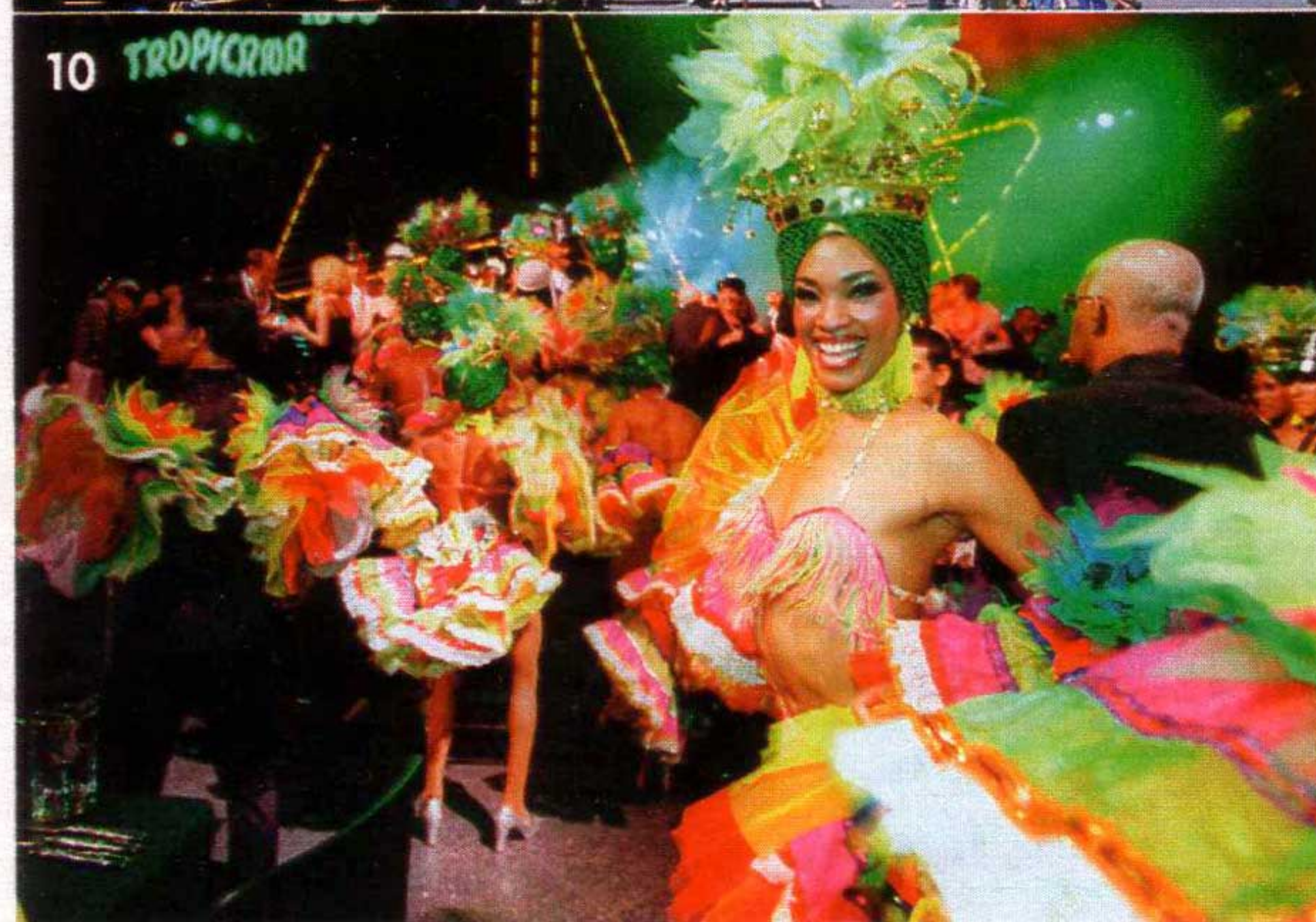
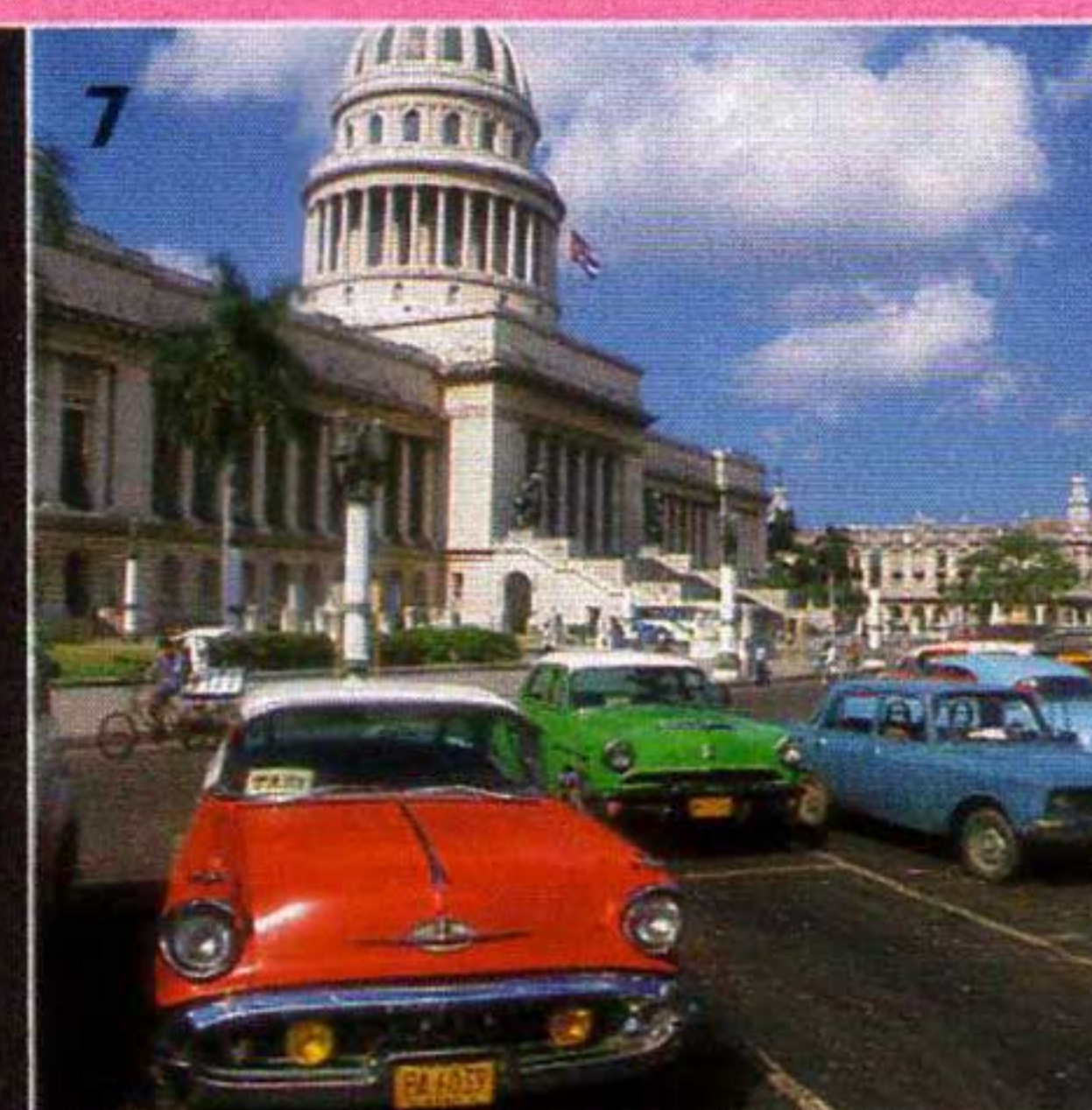
As we near Havana, we pull up to admire the rugged coastline and can't resist one last dip in the enticing Caribbean — the perfect end to our Cuban adventure.

Because Cuba was largely closed to tourism until 1990, the majority of the country is still wonderfully unspoilt. However, tourism is on the increase, and the pressure is on the US to drop its 40-year trade and travel restrictions. So if you want to see Cuba in all its natural glory, now is the time to go. ■



THERE'S SOMETHING IRREPRESSIBLE ABOUT THE CUBANS. THEY HAVE SO LITTLE YET LIVE SO FULLY

7 Vintage American cars have become prized possessions 8 El Floridita — Ernest Hemingway's favourite Cuban bar 9 Havana Cathedral is an impressive sight 10 Cubans always know how to party



FIVE FABULOUS THINGS TO DO

1 Relax on the roof of Hotel Inglaterra where you can listen to live salsa while sipping ice-cold mojito.

2 Check out Hemingway's favourite Cuban bar, El Floridita, 557 Calle — and treat yourself to one of their delicious daiquiris.

3 Drive to the coast and take a dip in the enticing turquoise waters of the Caribbean.

4 Visit one of the many salsa clubs — to all you have to do is dance to the music and laugh.

5 Head to the picturesque town of Trinidad where you can have your fortune told by a priest who practises Santería — Afro-Cuban religion was originally brought to the country by African slaves.

1 Music is central to the Cuban way of life 2 A tobacco plantation in the Vinales Valley 3 Cuban cigars are rolled by hand 4 Escape from the hustle and bustle of the city to Cuba's stunning beaches and the turquoise waters of the Caribbean 5 There's plenty to explore in the town of Trinidad 6 Eating is usually a relaxed affair



WHAT TO BUY

■ Che Guevara T-shirts, books and posters. The local hero's face is everywhere.

■ Brightly coloured acrylic paintings featuring famous buildings and landmarks.

■ Cuban cigars, £3-8 each.

■ Rum — a litre of the cheapest white rum is about £2.50. Seven-year-old dark rum costs about £4.

■ Try some perfume made from mariposa, the national flower. Visit Parfumeria Habana 1791, 156 Calle de los Mercaderes.

WHEN TO GO

Cuba is a good all-year-round destination. The hot, rainy season is May to October. Peak tourist season is December to April.

HOW TO GET THERE

Air Jamaica (020 8570 7999/www.airjamaica.com) flies from London Heathrow to Havana from around £515 return. Departure tax from Havana airport is around £15. Package holidays arranged through a travel agent cost from around £550 a week per person.