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My Habana



Robert Caplin

By Ruth Behar

Say the word Havana—or call her by her given name, *La Habana*—and you can't help but conjure up an image of a gorgeous city ravished by the sea and by history. *La Habana* channels the spirit of Aphrodite, of Venus, of Ochún, the Afro-Cuban goddess of the Santeria religion, who represents beauty, sensuality, *amor*. So how can I not feel blessed? I was conceived while my parents honeymooned in the beach town of Varadero, but I had the good fortune to be born in the only city on earth where I would have wanted to be born—Havana. *Gracias, Mami y Papi!*

I've been able to return many times, my credentials as a cultural anthropologist serving as my passport, allowing me to create a parallel life in the home I was torn away from when I was just 4. My parents won't go back, but since 1991, I've been determined to reclaim my native city. I can't remember anything of my life there, but maybe this amnesia is a blessing. I go back with innocent eyes, gazing at *La Habana* with unabashed wonder.

Mami and Papi grew up in the hustle and bustle of *La Habana Vieja*, the old colonial part of the city. They lived next door to Afro-Cuban neighbors, amid Jewish *shmatte* shops and Galician grocers, near the city's Chinatown. After I was born, they moved to El Vedado, a modern neighborhood lined with banyan trees. They found a two-bedroom apartment in a 1950s building, a block from the newly built Patronato Synagogue. Even in late 1959, months after the revolution had begun, it seemed we'd stay forever. But two years later, the revolution turned communist and my family joined the mass exodus of Jews and middle-class Cubans who found their livelihoods threatened. By the mid-1960s, Cuba had lost most of its Jewish population of 15,000, our family among them.

Countless hours of my visits have been spent on the corner of 15th and I Streets, the location of the five-story walk-up where we lived. Sometimes it feels as if I never left Havana. The tenant who now occupies our apartment always invites me in to visit my old home. She points to the sofa, chairs, and matrimonial bed we left behind, and says, "Tell your parents everything is exactly as they left it." Our former neighbors still live down the hall. Their daughter, Cristy, who

hasn't yet set foot outside Cuba, is my age, and she shares an apartment just like the one we had with her parents, husband, and daughter. We are each other's mirror—she longs for my freedom to travel; I long for her rootedness.

Initially, I wandered inside the gates of the synagogue out of mere curiosity, to encounter the Jewish community I might have been a part of. A thousand Jews, I learned, still lived in Cuba, most of mixed background or converts married to Jews. Assisting them in finding their heritage were American Jewish organizations that provided educational and financial support, and also sent "missions" of travelers who wanted to see the Jews of Cuba firsthand. I watched as the Jews of Cuba were treated as an exotic tribe. I resisted turning "my people" into a research subject but soon found I needed to hear their stories so I could know them beyond the stereotypes. To that end I have made a documentary film, *Adios Kerida/Goodbye Dear Love: A Cuban Sephardic Journey*, and written an ethnographic memoir, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (Rutgers University Press, 2007).

It wasn't just a Jewish home I'd lost. My bond to the throbbing pulse of an entire culture had been broken. Little by little, I tried to recover what I could by connecting with Cuban writers, artists, scholars, musicians, photographers, and filmmakers. I edited an anthology, *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), to gather together stories of Cuban-Americans searching for their roots, along with the stories of Cubans on the island who encountered them.

As an adolescent, I was ashamed when my parents danced the cha-cha-cha. Now I, too, danced it with passion. I started writing poems in Spanish inspired by the work of Dulce Maria Loynaz. She was part of the old aristocracy, the daughter of an illustrious general who fought for Cuba's independence from Spain. Her intimate poems, all penned before 1959, fanned her reputation as the Cuban Emily Dickinson. She was too much of a patriot to leave Cuba after the revolution to protect her wealth. So she stayed, but stopped writing altogether until her work was rediscovered in the 1990s and she was awarded Spain's Cervantes literary prize. She received me at her decaying mansion in El Vedado. At 90, her eyesight failing, Dulce asked that I read my poems aloud to her. My soul revived in the presence of the author of "Eternity," who fiercely declared: *Para ti lo infinito/o nada; lo inmortal/o esta muda tristeza/que no comprenderás* (For you, infinity/or nothing; what lasts all time/or this unspoken sadness/that you can't understand).

The kindness of a master poet to a fledgling one is the spirit of *La Habana*. There is enough generosity in my native city to make you want to cry. I think of my former nanny, Caro, now in her early 80s, who like so many poor black women of her generation came to Havana from the countryside to find work. She kept honeymoon nightgowns my mother left behind and waited patiently for her to return, and when she didn't, gave them to me to bring back to my mother. Caro salvaged our history, fragile as the lace from which the gowns were made.

I love *La Habana* with equal parts awe and anguish. My *Habana!* I lost her once and don't want to lose her again. To share her is to lose her. So why would I share her? This has been my conundrum in writing this essay. I'm no different from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who begins his chronicle of his journey to the "sad tropics" of Brazil in a self-lacerating way: "Travel and travelers are two things I loathe—and yet, here I am, all set to tell the story of my expeditions."

Of course, I also know that in our global era we're no longer so different from the tourists that anthropologists often disdain. If we find a place seductive, everybody else does, too. Still, I have watched with trepidation as a new aura associated with all things Havanan has taken the world by storm, even reaching my university town of Ann Arbor, Mich. There's now a Cafe Habana near our Main Street. I got sad eating tasteless black beans under too bright chandeliers and never returned. Since the mid-1990s, everything you could plunder from Havana has been plundered: music, art, literature, cigars, Chevys, Che, dance, sex, incandescent light, joy, grief, and the name itself.

Cuba's 1959 revolution played a crucial and ironic role in the current lusting after Havana. The struggle to oust dictator Fulgencio Batista began far from Havana, in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, on the rural eastern end of the island, where the revolutionary leader Fidel Castro was born. Castro rose to the top thanks to the enthusiastic support of the peasants, and repaid his debt by seeking to improve living conditions in the countryside, but also by tracking a muddy boot across Havana's grandeur.

For his first home in the city he chose nothing less than a posh suite on the 23rd floor of the newly built Hilton Hotel, rebaptizing it *La Habana Libre*. Cuban resentments against American support of Batista ran deep, as did nationalist pride against American control of the economy. Castro acted on these passions, expropriating American-owned businesses and leaving only old Chevys and Buicks as vestiges of the vast American empire that had once treated the island as its playground.

In the heyday of the revolution, Havana's architectural splendor became synonymous with the lush, degenerate lifestyle of the traitorous bourgeoisie, who abandoned the nation and the revolution. Havana, ever at the mercy of sea salt, crumbled. Spectacular buildings, now occupied by people who didn't have the means to maintain them, became spectacular ruins. A famous line in Tomás Gutierrez Alea's classic film *Memories of Underdevelopment* put it this way: Havana, once "the Paris of the Caribbean," had become its Tegucigalpa.

The forsaking of Havana had a positive effect: What didn't collapse was preserved by neglect. Harvard-trained Cuban architects had planned to do away with historic buildings and replace them with glass and steel high-rises. Colonial plazas were to become parking lots. Ultimately, the revolution "saved" Havana as an urban landscape, ruralizing rather than demolishing.

But it wasn't until Unesco named *La Habana Vieja* a World Heritage site, in 1982, that a true appreciation for the city's urban landscape could be cultivated. Under the leadership of Eusebio Leal Spengler, Havana's official historian, the city got its first facelift. A frenzy of preservation and restoration efforts has followed, but there are too many decaying architectural beauties to fix. Much of the city is still in ruins, and it is the surreal combination of a city outfitted both in finery and colorful rags—sometimes on the very same street—that makes it so evocative, as portrayed in the film *Havana: The New Art of Making Ruins*. One thing is clear: Havana no longer needs to aspire to become the Paris of the Caribbean. Havana can just be Havana, and that is glorious enough.

Havana, like New York City, is a walker's paradise and can best be seen and appreciated on foot. Maybe because I grew up in New York, I feel that Havana resembles the Big Apple more than Miami. *Habaneros* like my parents were put into the awful position of having to choose between a city as urban as theirs or the sweetness of eternal summers. Most chose the latter, and so the Miami Cuban exile community was born. But had it existed, they would have chosen a tropical New York City.

Telling people where to go in Havana today is like trying to tell them where to go in New York. Suddenly there's so much to do, so much to see, so many hotels, restaurants, and nightclubs, stores with cute souvenirs, and museums and galleries galore. Most opened only in the last decade to boost tourism and bring in hard currency to protect the educational and health benefits of the revolution, so the government says. Family-run businesses, along with hustlers and sex workers, have sprung up to try to gain a piece of the market. The city throbs with raw electricity ignited by its existence on the uneasy border between communism and capitalism.

Habaneros say they're prepared for the return of the *americanos* once the embargo is finally lifted, yet they worry it may be an avalanche they won't be able to control. For now, Cuba remains an anomaly in the world of travel for most Americans. The embargo forbids travel to the island for tourism and recreation. If you do manage to get there on scholarly business (see sidebar), you can't use your credit and debit cards (not to mention your cell phone). Every time I go, I feel as if I'm rehearsing for a role in *The Godfather, Part II*. I bring a money belt, plus envelopes from my credit union, stuffed with cash. Havana isn't cheap anymore, and I like to keep a reserve in case there's an emergency (Fidel dies) and I need to get out quick. (Remember: I'm the child of exiles who left in a hurry.)

For those of us who have witnessed the prosperity of the tourist sector blossom overnight, it is shocking to wander around Havana. I remember when food was scarce, even with dollars in your pocket, back at the height of "the special period" (1991-94) following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian subsidies vanished into thin air, and the government imposed austerity measures on the Cuban people while seeking foreign investments to remain afloat. My friends in Havana, too ashamed to ask for food, begged for soap, refusing to smell (they said) like the unbathed Russians who'd abandoned them.

Once, after an especially tough "special period" visit, I was happy to be on the same flight back to Miami as my friend, Rosa Lowinger, a conservation specialist. We had a long wait and were both very hungry. I had held on to a banana but was reluctant to offer it to her because it was badly bruised. I was about to toss it in the trash when Rosa said, "Give it to me, I'll eat it." After gobbling it, bruises and all, she told me, "I've been living with Cubans for two weeks. Yesterday I would've eaten the peel, too."

The majority of *habaneros* face a grueling struggle for survival, living on low Cuban peso salaries (earning approximately \$15 to \$25 a month). They struggle to acquire the only money that has value in Cuba's growing tourist sector—the convertible currency known as CUC\$ (pronounced "kooks"), whose value is set by the government at 25 percent above the U.S. dollar. Often, as a visitor, you feel as did my friend, Sandra Cisneros, the writer, who traveled with me to Havana on a trip I organized for scholars and artists. An elderly man approached, asking her,

as many Cubans do, to give him a souvenir. She reached in her handbag and came up with a Band-Aid, which in Spanish we call a *curita*, "a little cure." Havana was hemorrhaging, she said, and all she could offer was a *curita*.

Fortunately, the grace of Havana is that there is still much one can delight in without money. Havana is a city that bombards all the senses at once. Music spills out into the street in the rhythmic cadence of Cuban Spanish, and from the radio, from troubadours, from drums calling to the *orishas* of the Santeria religion, and from boom boxes on the Malecón. This seaside promenade is the outdoor bedroom of thousands of lovers and can be walked from end to end. Embracing the old and new city, it runs from the colonial plazas of *Habana Vieja*, founded in the 16th century, to the Hotel Riviera, the Modernist, aqua-hued jewel built by the mobster Meyer Lansky in El Vedado. When cool winds engulf Havana in January, the sight of the sea spilling over the Malecón is absolutely thrilling.

Down near the port, where my Jewish family once lived, you hear the melancholy sound of the foghorn rising from the ferry that daily makes the crossing from the bay of Havana to the town of Regla, famous for its shrine to a Virgin whom Cubans refer to as Yemayá, the goddess of the sea. Blood and feathers used in rituals yield an earthy scent I associate with the new hip-hop-savvy Havana, where Santeria initiates, dressed in white from head to toe, multicolored beads for the different saints peeking out of their shirt collars, stroll proudly. Yet eventually all smells are swept away by the sea. Everywhere you go you taste salt in the air.

To witness the lively, often fraught, interaction of Cubans and tourists, visit each of *La Habana Vieja's* four restored plazas: the Plaza de Armas, the Plaza Vieja, the Plaza de San Francisco de Asis, and the Plaza de la Catedral. In the Plaza de Armas, the city's oldest square, vendors sell secondhand books, some banned by the government, and such treasures as old cigar labels. In Plaza Vieja, an airy square framed by mansions with wrought-iron balconies, La Casona Gallery features work by edgy artists like Rocío García de la Nuez, whose startling images often focus on sexuality and danger.

Havana is most of all an intensely visual city. A feast for the eyes. Vain. Loves to be seen. Invites voyeurs. Breathtaking views are abundant and surely will be cataloged one day. Photographers and filmmakers in Havana sweat trying to capture not just the drama of the outdoors, but the elegiac interior spaces, walls turned into archaeological poems with their peeling layers of paint and mosaic floor tiles dancing in arabesques. An outsider like Wim Wenders chose to saturate Havana color in his film *Buena Vista Social Club*, while insider Fernando Pérez chose to mute Havana color through the rainy window of lost hopes in *Suite Habana*. Either way, the light in Havana is visceral, palpable.

La Habana is addressed with the feminine article, and represented as a woman, but it is the male warriors of Cuba who are glorified in statues all over the city. Images of Che Guevara, the martyred Argentine revolutionary leader who fought for Cuba, thrive on billboards, T-shirts, and every variety of tourist kitsch. Even more preponderant is José Martí, the apostle of freedom, a poet and journalist who lived in New York for 15 years and returned to Cuba in 1895 to die fighting for his nation's independence from Spain. An interesting way to see Havana would be to make a pilgrimage to all the white plaster busts of Martí found in front of primary schools. But

Martí is at his most elegant in the 1905 marble monument at the palm-tree-lined Parque Central. Back in 1949 two American sailors dared to urinate on Martí, and landed in jail.

Perhaps this disrespect has never been forgotten and that is why Martí is portrayed so angrily in his latest incarnation in front of the U.S. Interests Section on the Malecón, which has taken the place of the American embassy since the United States and Cuba broke diplomatic relations in 1961. Now Martí appears as a giant bronze statue holding the child Elián González in his arms. Elián was the Cuban boy who became the subject of a notorious custody dispute that ended when U.S. authorities took him from his Miami relatives and returned him to his father in Cuba. Yet Martí still points a reproachful finger at the *americanos* for maintaining an embargo seen as deeply unjust on the island (though Cubans joke that their national hero is really pointing out where to get visas to travel to the United States).

Next to the statue stand 138 flagpoles flying black banners, white stars at their center, each representing a year in Cuba's struggle for independence, which began in 1868 with the first war Cubans launched against Spain. Erected in 2006, they cast a dark shadow on the Malecón and its picture-postcard view of the open sea, suggesting that Cuba has yet to be free and that the United States is at fault. No matter how much I make Havana mine, these black flags are meant to remind me that as a citizen of the United States, I live in the country that once controlled Cuba with its presence and now seeks to do so with its absence.

Despite so many returns, I get scared on the day I have to leave. I've inherited the paranoia of my parents and fear the immigration authorities won't let me out. At the same time, I'm sad. For reassurance, my former nanny Caro always goes to the airport with me, just as she did when I was a child leaving Cuba. Time after time, we repeat the scene of my departure. We say goodbye and I cross to the other side, losing my *Habana* again.

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Havana Haunts



Dan Ham, Aurora Photos

By Ruth Behar

Here is a listing of favorite Havana spots. If calling from the United States, add 011537 before the Havana number. Unless otherwise indicated, all listed establishments require payment in CUC\$—convertible pesos, pronounced "kooks"—obtainable at the airport or at Cadeca money-changing counters in the city.

Cafes

Café El Escorial, Mercaderes 317, Plaza Vieja. Coffee beans from the Escambray Mountains are toasted, ground, and prepared in 60 ways, including with aged rum.

Pastelería Francesa, Paseo de Martí 411. Pastries and outdoor seating facing the Parque Central hubbub. Next door to the Gran Teatro de La Habana, home of the Ballet of Cuba.

Coppelia Ice Cream Park, Calle 23, Vedado. The film *Strawberry and Chocolate* made it famous, but it already was a mainstay among *habaneros*. Nationalized ice cream is available for the equivalent of 20 cents, if you pay in Cuban pesos and don't mind waiting in line for an hour. Or you can pay much more in CUC\$ and be served quickly. Outdoor seating under shady trees is a respite from the frenzied street life of 23rd Street, known as La Rampa.

Restaurants

La Guarida, Concordia 418, between Gervasio and Escobar, Centro Habana. The old movie set for *Strawberry and Chocolate*, located in a Havana ruin deliberately kept that way for its charm, now houses a gourmet restaurant worth splurging on. The queen of Spain has eaten here. Without doubt it's the city's best cuisine, in a staged nostalgic setting.

Viejo Amigo Restaurante (Lou Pang You), Dragones 356, between Manrique and San Nicolás, Centro Habana. A large upstairs dining hall where you can get generous portions of fried rice and *ropa vieja* (shredded beef) and myriad combinations of Chinese and Cuban food.

El Aljibe, Avenida 7, between 24 and 26, Miramar. Under an enormous thatched roof, all you can eat from the fixed-menu offerings of chicken in bitter-orange sauce, black beans and rice, fried plantains, and more.

Paladar Vista al Mar, Calle 1, between 22 and 24, Miramar. Fresh fish and seafood served in a low-key family restaurant overlooking the ocean.

Paladar Doña Carmela, Calle B, #10, Parque Histórico Militar Morro-Cabaña. Should you visit the Morro and Cabaña castles, to the east of the city, stop for a delicious Creole lunch or dinner in the tropical backyard of this family restaurant.

Don Leoni Pizza, Calle 17, between 10 and 12, Vedado. Homemade pizza from a street vendor, sold for Cuban pesos. Look for the line of people waiting and you'll find it.

Hotels

Hotel Nacional, Calle 21 and O, Vedado (836-3564). On a bluff overlooking the Malecón, this lavish Mediterranean Deco hotel from the 1930s is one of Havana's landmarks. Stroll through the patio even if you don't stay there.

Hotel Parque Central, Neptuno Street, between Padro and Zulueta, on the Parque Central (860-6627). A luxurious hotel, located in a restored ruin, with large rooms and an excellent breakfast buffet. Stunning views from the rooftop pool and terrace.

Hotel Raquel, Amargura 103, corner of San Ignacio, Habana Vieja (860-8280). Boutique Jewish-themed hotel in an Art Nouveau building with 25 rooms named after biblical figures. There's a room named Ruth, where I stayed one time, wondering sadly if that was all I had left of my home in Havana. The small rooftop terrace looks out sweetly on the old city.

Casas Particulares (Licensed Private Homes)

Casa de Cristy y Pepe, Calle 15 No. 278, Esquina I, Vedado (832-2232, cristyandpepe@gmail.com). In this building, where I spent my early childhood, our former neighbors have an independent two-bedroom apartment on the first floor available for rent. Pepe will prepare delicious Creole meals for an additional cost, and Cristy will help you practice your Spanish. The apartment is a block from the Patronato Synagogue and within walking distance of all the sights in El Vedado.

Casa de Lily y Chino, Infanta 254, between San Lazaro and Concordia, Centro Habana (879-8427, <http://www.casalily.net>, lilichino197@gmail.com; on Facebook under "Casa de Lily y Chino"). If you'd like to stay with a Cuban family and don't mind sharing the bathroom or climbing a narrow flight of stairs, this is a great choice within walking distance of the Parque Central. My graduate student, Lara Stein Pardo, was so delighted by the creative vegetarian meals that Lily makes (on request) that she created a Facebook page with photographs of the food that look like artistic displays.

Museums and Galleries

Museums are so abundant in Havana that I feel silly mentioning only a few, but these are the ones that can't be missed. The first three offer insight into the history of the city, the Cuban

revolution, and the Afro-Cuban legacy. The rest are places to see and experience the cornucopia of Cuban visual arts. If you're pressed for time, at least see the wrenching Kafkaesque paintings by Antonia Eiriz at Bellas Artes (Cuban Collection wing) and the startling images of sexual danger by Rocío García de la Nuez at La Casona Gallery.

Museo de la Ciudad (Museum of the City), Tacón, Plaza de Armas

Museo de la Revolución, Refugio, between Avenida de las Misiones y Zulueta

Casa de Africa, Obrapía 157, Habana Vieja

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Trocadero, between Monserrate and Zulueta

Centro de Arte Contemporáneo "Wifredo Lam," San Ignacio, No. 22, corner of Empedrado, Habana Vieja

Fototeca de Cuba, Mercaderes 307, Plaza Vieja

La Casona Gallery, Muralla 107, corner of San Ignacio, Plaza Vieja

Ludwig Foundation, Calle 13, No. 509, between D and E, Vedado

Espacio Aglutinador, Calle 6, No. 602, between 25 and 27, Vedado

Servando Cabrera Moreno Library and Museum, Paseo, corner of 13, Vedado

Cultural and Research Centers

University of Havana, San Lázaro and L, Vedado. Founded in 1728 in La Habana Vieja, the university moved to its location on a Vedado hilltop at the turn of the 20th century.

Casa de las Américas, Calle 3 and G, Vedado. Promotes research in literature and the arts and publishes *Revista Casa* magazine. Offers exhibits, musical concerts, and a bookstore, and is a frequent site of international conferences.

Fundación Fernando Ortiz, Calle 27, #160, corner of L, Vedado. Named in honor of the anthropologist Ortiz, author of *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, the center focuses on the study of popular culture in Cuba. Publishes *Catauro*, an anthropology journal.

Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Uneac), Calle 17, corner of H, Vedado. The headquarters of the national union of writers and artists is housed in a mansion with beautiful stained-glass windows. Offers inexpensive bolero concerts Saturday nights on the patio.

Centro Cultural Dulce Maria Loynaz, Calle 19, corner of E, Vedado. The former mansion of Havana's great intimate poet, often called Cuba's Emily Dickinson, offers literary events.

Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba, Paseo de Martí, 615, near Parque La Fraternidad (8635953). Offers *tambores* (invocations of the *orishas* through drumming) on alternate Fridays.

Music

Habana Jazz Café, inside the Galería Paseo mall, Avenida Paseo and Calle 3, just off the Malecón. One of the best places to hear live jazz in Havana, even when geriatric white male tourists are also enjoying the entertainment with young and beautiful black courtesans.

Tropicana Cabaret, Calle 73 and 43, No 4505, near Vedado. I've been there only once and didn't have to pay (show, dinner, and drinks costs about \$120). Having never seen statuesque women dancing with chandeliers on their heads, I was impressed. The setting of this "paradise under the stars" is still as enchanting as it was before the revolution.

Basilica Menor de San Francisco de Asis. On the square of the same name in Habana Vieja, this 16th-century convent offers perfect acoustics and regular concerts. Stop by and inquire about the schedule. You might be lucky enough to hear the Camerata Romeu, the all-women string ensemble, playing beautiful renditions of Cuban classical music.

Shopping

You'll find Benetton all by yourself on the Plaza de San Francisco de Asis, and you won't be able to miss the big outdoor fair around the corner from the Plaza de la Catedral, where I've bought dozens of maracas I never play. Here are a few places to get unique souvenirs:

Secondhand Booksellers at Plaza de Armas, Habana Vieja. In addition to books, some of them banned by the government, you can find old embossed cigar labels and other treasures.

Habana 1791, Calle Mercaderes 156, Habana Vieja. Fragrances from Cuban flowers, including rose, violet, even tobacco.

Casa del Abanico, Calle Obrapia 107, La Habana Vieja.

Handmade fans—a necessity in the tropics—that can be painted with designs or names you choose.

La Moderna Poesía, Calle Obispo 527, Habana Vieja. Art Deco building filled with books about Havana, music CD's, and marvelous silk-screened Cuban movie posters.

Partagas cigar factory, Industria No 520, Habana Vieja. You can also buy cigars in hotel shops, at the airport, and, for a fraction of the price, from street vendors, but street quality isn't guaranteed.

Day Trip From Havana

Matanzas, only an hour away, is my favorite provincial city in Cuba. It's a stunning town in its own right, but also the home of Ediciones Vigía, an independent publishing collective in operation since 1985. Located at the Plaza de la Vigía (Watchtower Square), overlooking the tranquil Río San Juan, the collective produces limited editions of exquisite handcrafted books. It's easy to get to Matanzas on an air-conditioned Viazul bus, for about \$15 round-trip.

Recommended Books

Tour books on Havana are plentiful. (That wasn't always the case.) To gain a deeper sense of Havana's history and architecture, consult some of these:

Distant Palaces, by Abilio Estévez

Havana: Autobiography of a City, by Alfredo José Estrada

Havana Before Castro: When Cuba Was a Tropical Playground, by Peter Moruzzi

Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis, by Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula

Inside Havana, photographs by Andrew Moore

The Havana Guide: Modern Architecture, 1925-1965, by Eduardo Luis Rodríguez

Tropicana Nights: The Life and Times of the Legendary Cuban Nightclub, by Rosa Lowinger and Ofelia Fox

For information about the poet Dulce María Loynaz (1902-97), see *Michigan Quarterly Review*, fall 1997, 36 (4): 529-551.

A Few of the Best Cuban Web sites

<http://www.havana-cultura.com> (Features compelling subtitled interviews with writers, artists, filmmakers, and musicians, each of whom also gives his/her take on "my Habana".)

<http://www.desdecuba.com> (Best outspoken commentary on Cuban culture and politics, including by the award-winning blogger Yoani Sánchez, of Generación Y.)

<http://www.cubanow.net> (An informative digital magazine of Cuban art and culture.)

<http://www.cubaheritage.com> (Sponsored by the Office of the City Historian of Havana; offers a network of excursions, hotels, and restaurants that support restoration projects in the city.)

<http://www.havanatimes.org> (Thoughtful reporting on events in the city, diaries about living there, and useful information on rules and regulations for those traveling to Cuba.)

If You Find Yourself in Miami

Miami is Havana's equally exciting counterpoint. If you have a few hours between flights, take a cab to one of these restaurants and you'll get a great meal in one of three different neighborhoods, each with its own unique Cuban-Miami fusion.

The Café at Books and Books, 927 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach; (305) 695-8898. Outdoors, on the balmy pedestrian walkway of Lincoln Road, the Cuban-Jewish chef Bernie Matz serves healthful salads, sandwiches, grilled fish, and meats. His black-bean hummus is a good appetizer, and his guava flan is the best. Stop inside the cozy bookstore, which specializes in literature, art, design, fashion, and architecture.

Uva 69, 6900 Biscayne Blvd, Miami; (305) 754-9022. A delightful bistro and wine bar founded by two Cuban brothers, Sinuhe and Michael Vega. I can't get enough of their fig crostini and sake-marinated grouper filet with crispy spinach. Choose indoor or outdoor patio seating in a 1920s building in the MIMO (Miami Modern) historical district.

Versailles Restaurant, 3555 SW Eighth Street, Miami; (305) 444-0240. This rococo palace of mirrors, nowadays a little worn and melancholy, is still the best place to go for classic Cuban food: black beans and rice, *arroz con pollo*, fried plantains, and yucca, or just for a snack of Cuban coffee and a guava pastry. Located on Calle Ocho, the original home of the Cuban exiles, it is where the television crews head for hot opinions whenever there are dramatic developments on the island. On Saturdays it's open until 3 a.m., when you never know whom you'll meet at that old mambo hour.

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But Can You Travel to Cuba?

The U.S. trade embargo against Cuba has for decades effectively barred the average American tourist from traveling to the island. But certain categories of travelers, including scholars, journalists, relatives of Cuban citizens, religious and humanitarian groups, and others may travel to Cuba under rules developed by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

Scholars have traveled to Cuba to conduct research; attend academic conferences; participate in art shows, book fairs, and cultural festivals; and take part in licensed humanitarian, medical, or religious missions. Several American universities have created semester-abroad programs in Havana for undergraduates. Graduate students can do doctoral research if affiliated with a Cuban research institution. President Barack Obama's recent opening toward Cuba now makes it possible for those of Cuban ancestry to visit Cuban relatives whenever they wish. For more information on who can legally travel to Cuba, see

<http://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/programs/cuba/cuba.shtml>.

Charter Companies

Here is a partial list of companies that plan travel to Cuba. All offer daily charter flights from Miami to Havana. The flight lasts only half an hour, and Cubans always applaud when landing on Cuban soil.

ABC Charters, www.abc-charters.com

Common Ground Education & Travel Services, www.commongroundtravel.com

Cuba Tours and Travel, www.cubatoursandtravel.com

Marazul Charters, www.marazulcharters.com