

ART OF ETHEL TAWÉ STUDIO.

TRAVELOGUE :: VOLUME 1.

DISCOVERING CUBA

a travelogue by Ethel Tawé.



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There comes a time when you have to stop making excuses for not following your heart and living your passion. Many of us settle for where we are in life and enjoy the bliss comfort of home and the familiar. I am a victim of this; and this is why I travel, and travel often. Travelling to Cuba has long been a dream of mine, and while I had so many questions about how to get there, what to expect, what is appropriate to do, or how to get to the places I spent hours swooning at on my computer screen, I set off anyway! With the support of family and friends and persistent dedication, this Cuban expedition became a reality. As a Cameroonian artist living in the diaspora, I have always been interested in African diasporic cultures that continue to preserve and interact with the continent. After exploring these subjects in my artwork and studies, and learning Spanish for several semesters, the trip served as an alignment of my interests and an opportunity to learn! This mini guide is aimed at giving you a little insight on my experience as well as act as a reference point for those seeking to create a similar experience.



THE MYSTERY

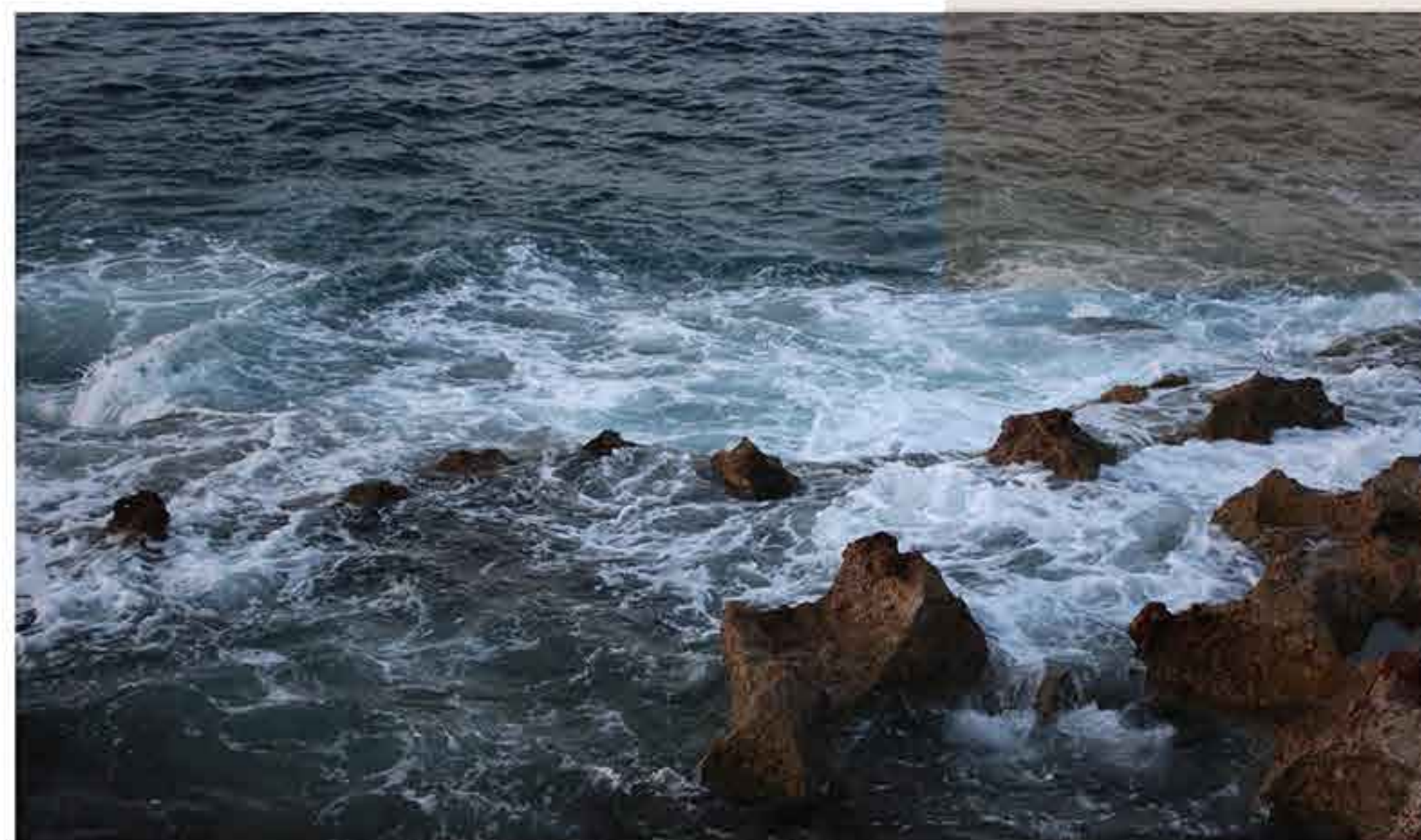
In my experience, Cuba is one of those places you just can't fully prepare for. During my pre-travel research, it was difficult to find clear and consistent information about places to visit, travel restrictions, internet connectivity, Cuban currency, socialism in Cuba, and more. This is likely largely due to limited connectivity within the country but also as a result of the US blockade and access to global economies. It is also what kept things very interesting throughout my one month there. For those who would rather not completely dive into the deep end, here's a little info to demystify the experience of travelling to Cuba...

travel

Restrictions

As a Cameroon national, the Cuban visa was probably the cheapest + quickest visa process I have ever experienced.

I simply filled out a form, went to the embassy with no appointment needed, and within an hour I was granted a tourist card/slip which I presented with my passport upon arrival in Havana. The process might be slightly different depending on where you are travelling from, but overall the Cuban visa process is quite simple. I encourage US Citizens to seize the opportunity to visit while it lasts; it is not as complicated as it may seem for you either. Instead of tourism, if that's your purpose of travel, you simply have to list 'people-to-people' interaction. While there are many great tour packages available, it is also not impossible to take the journey independently.



currency

The currency situation in Cuba is quite confusing. Upon arrival I differed changing money at the airport due to extremely long queues. Going instead to a Casa De Cambio (known as CADECA), I was able to exchange Euros and Pounds for Convertible Cuban Pesos (CUC). You will always be asked for your passport and automatically given this CUC currency as it is the standard for tourists; the rates are equal/standard everywhere. Some CADECAs will only exchange certain foreign currencies but most will take Euros and Dollars; however American bank cards are not recognized meaning US tourists have to carry cash until further developments in diplomatic relations. In Havana, I recommend the CADECAs on Aranguren or Obispo Street as they accept most currencies. There are Western Unions close by to both which are handy in case of emergencies. You can also exchange money at banks such as Banco Metropolitano but the queues can be hours long.

There is a second currency circulating Cuba, which is mostly used by the locals. It is called the Peso Cubano and abbreviated as CUP. Local markets will accept both currencies but often give you change in the local CUP or a mix of both currencies. You might also want to exchange any leftover CUCs before leaving the country as it is not recognized and is unconvertible outside of Cuba. My Confused about the mismatched acronyms and rates?

Here's a little breakdown:

CUC: Convertible Cuban Peso (Tourist Currency).

CUP: Peso Cubano (Local Currency).

1 CUC ~ 1 US Dollar

1 CUC ~ 25 CUP

CUP is also often written as MN (Moneda Nacional).

Both CUP and CUC can sometimes appear as \$ (Dollar).

See the 'Resources' section for more.

internet

and connectivity

Cuba has a challenging internet situation, which is difficult to navigate in our current technology age. Things we often take for granted, such as contacting loved ones back home, or checking emails and social media websites, suddenly become a calculated and concentrated part of the day when you get the chance to connect. Mobile data is rare due to extremely high costs, and WIFI is limited, and fairly expensive. Wifi hotspots are literally one of the most fascinating things to observe as a millennial. Here is how it usually works:

I. You might be approached by a random person in the park discreetly trying to sell you a WIFI card; do not be alarmed. While this is technically not accepted, it is common practice to buy from these resellers. Buying WIFI cards from the official ETECSA office, might leave you waiting a while. Some police are lenient with the street practice, but I definitely witnessed a “Wifi Dealer” being severely questioned by law enforcement.

II. Check that your scratch card has not expired or been tampered with. The most common card type grants you access for 1 hour but you can request for a 30 minute card too. You do not have to use the allocated time all at once! A card from the WIFI parks should cost 3 CUC for one hour.

III. Connect to “WIFI_ETECSA” and use the user ID and password on the card to log in when prompted. A one hour countdown begins once you log in so don’t forget to log out or switch off your WIFI once you’re done.

Alternatives

IV. For those need to work while away, you may find it tricky to use your laptop to connect when in Cuba. WIFI hotspots are public and crowded spaces like parks and town squares, and cyber cafes are not common or reliable. The best option for using your laptop is at hotel lounges that offers WIFI. Hotel Sevilla in Old Havana, for example, sells WIFI cards at the reception for 2 CUC and has a lovely courtyard that doesn’t get too crowded. Every Wednesday and Friday, they even host a cocktail hour with live music and free drinks!

V. On certain streets around Centro Havana, local “WIFI dealers” offer wifi hotspots from their phone. It is often much cheaper than at the park (1 to 2 CUC per hour) but you unfortunately have to use the full hour all at once.

Some Wifi Hotspots: Parque Central, Parque Trillo, Parque Fe de Valle, Hotels etc

Simcards

Contrary to what I was initially told, tourists are able to get local simcards. This, of course, is expensive and doesn’t normally include an option for mobile data. The simcard costs 40 CUC; this includes an allocated a number is which is valid for one year after your last top up. You can grab one from some offices of ETECSA, the national telecom company.



Casas Particulares

The most common form of accommodation for the average traveller in Cuba are 'Casas'. A Casa, or Casa Particular, is a homestay or bed & breakfast style living arrangement. Long before Airbnb, the Cuban government allowed locals to rent out rooms in their homes to tourists. You can book these online on sites like Homestay or through Airbnb. It is a standard government enforced procedure for them to ask for your passport details upon arrival to register your name, details and signature.

Hostels

Scattered around most cities are several backpacker hostels, providing mostly shared rooms and similar services to certain Casas. While these could be good for short stays, the pace of travel and quality of the accommodation can really determine your experience. While I opted out from this option for my month-long trip, it might be worth considering depending on your living preference. I wanted to be able to cook my own meals, and enjoy the quiet and privacy after many long days of exploring.

Hotels

It seems that the hotel industry has not yet been able to accommodate to the high influx of tourists, making hotels extremely pricey and limited in range. Hotels like the famous Melia Cohiba in Havana or the scenic Hotel Los Jazmines in Viñales are popular points of interest and luxury in Cuba. While I chose the Casa experience as opposed to a hotel, I still made some time to enjoy a mojito and the amazing view from the terrace at Havana's grand Hotel Nacional, and some jazz in Salon Tarquinius at the famous hotel Habana Libre. The rooftop at the new Grand Hotel Manzana Kempinski is another gem in the city!

health

and safety

A few weeks before flying out, I consulted my GP to check if all was well. Only a few vaccines were required for Cuba which I already had so I was good to go! I also checked for an update on allergies just for peace of mind especially for in the countryside. I was not asked for my vaccination card upon arrival but it is still important to have with you. There has been a Zika Virus threat in certain parts of the country in recent years, and sudden change in temperature, diet and pace of life can often take a toll on the system. On the plus side as I was told by a local, though I cannot verify as fact, the extremely advanced healthcare system of Cuba can provide some free healthcare if you were to fall ill out there. It is still wise to have your travel/health insurance handy, and ensure that it covers Cuba.

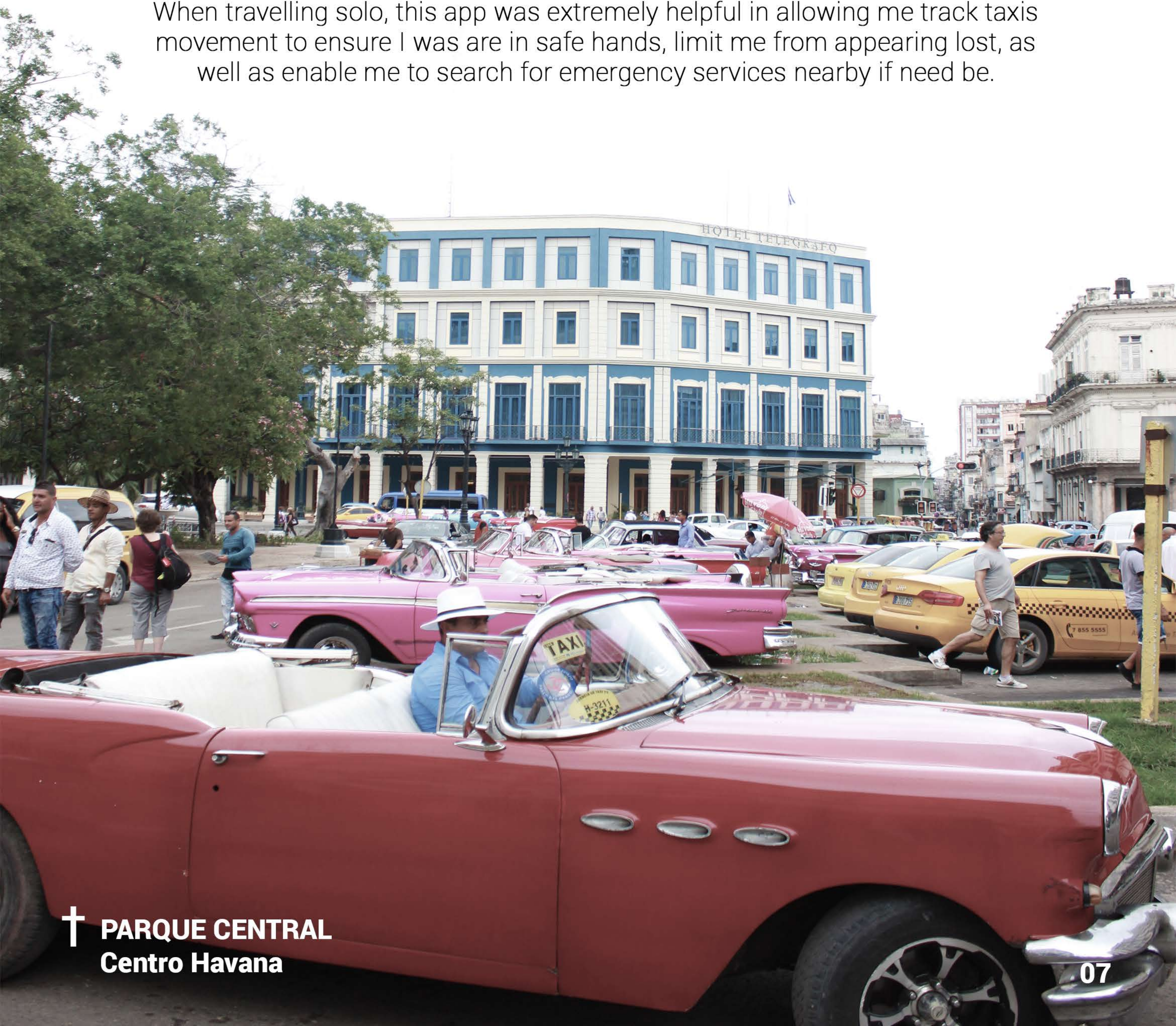
Aside from a few health concerns, Cuba is one of the safest places to travel in the Caribbean especially as a solo traveller. The country has some the lowest crimes rates in the world and a heavy police presence. While some areas may certainly look 'dodgy', with mostly petty crime and hustling, one must still exercise common street smartness. However, I was told by a local that "Cuba has no mafia, only revolution!".

I do worry that this might change quickly as the influx of tourist is complexifying cross-cultural relations with foreigners and the Cuban people in my opinion. A new aggressive type of tourism might (or might not) force crime rates to unfortunately rise.

TRANSPORTATION

While accessibility to transportation is hardly an issue, it can still get a bit tricky to navigate your way around town. First order of business is to download the map app: [maps.me](https://www.maps.me/). You must download both the app and the country you are visiting to get full access to it when offline! This is perfect because it beats Cuba's lack of mobile data problem and you are able to use your GPS freely, search up points of interest, and navigate your way around.

When travelling solo, this app was extremely helpful in allowing me track taxis movement to ensure I was in safe hands, limit me from appearing lost, as well as enable me to search for emergency services nearby if need be.





TAXIS are a common and reliable standard. Always negotiate the price before you get into the car. My host advised to start by asking for 5 CUC less for quotes of 10 CUC and above. A taxi from the airport to Central Havana for example should cost around 25-30 CUC depending on your bargaining skills! There are just a few things to note to avoid any unfortunate situations. Do not take taxis with an extra person in the front passenger seat. This is a popular scamming technique which could lead you to pay much more than necessary. Besides that, enjoying hopping in and out of colorful vintage cars and breezing down the Havana seawall known as the *Malecón*.

BiciTaxis

One of my favourite and most economical means of transport in Cuba are the BiciTaxis. From as low as 1 CUC you can hop on these things for short rides when the heat has simply gotten the best of you. They are bicycles with little carriages attached to them. Electric ones are also available, similar to the 'tuk-tuks' popular in several parts of the world.

Machinas /'maki•na/

Machinas are shared taxi rides with strangers that can cost as little as 1 CUC. In Centro Havana you can catch a machina on Calle Neptuno (and other streets). As long as you don't mind getting squished and having no AC for a few minutes, you'll be safe and fine. Havana is not that big and doesn't seem to have a traffic problem, so getting around is generally not too tedious.

Taxi Colectivo

Collective Taxis are a really convenient alternative to travel to other cities and for little day trips. It might be worth noting that most of them are really old cars and will not have air conditioning, so try to schedule early morning or evening rides to avoid heat stroke!

Buses and Taxis intercity

While there are several intercity bus services, the most recommended were *Viazul* and *Transtur*. I decided to take Viazul to travel out to Vinales and though it was well air conditioned and clean, we had an unfortunate breakdown which delayed the trip by over an hour. Another issue was with booking the bus tickets which require a trip to the Viazul bus station located 5km outside of the city center. Taking a taxi there and back ends up incurring extra costs, about 10 CUC more. On my return I chose to go with Transtur, which for only 2 CUC more provided a more positive experience. Their offices are located in the town centers, the buses are clean and air conditioned, there is a bilingual conductor on board for any questions, and the drive was direct, making the trip 2 hours shorter than with Viazul.

Sample Prices (Havana to Vinales)

Viazul: 12 CUC (one way)

Transtur: 14 CUC (one way)

Taking a private taxi is another option and for parties of 4, it is probably the best. A trip to Vinales ranges around 60 CUC one way for all (about 15 CUC each for 4). The taxi is door to door, so you won't have to worry about finding your way to the bus stop or station. You also have the advantage of going at your own pace and making pitstops.



CUBAN *Cuisine*

From rooftop bars to edgy restaurants to Paladars (family run eateries), Cuba has a range of tastes to explore. Expect a live band serenading you at the high-end spots (also some local) and reggaeton booming from speakers at the Paladars. Also expect a range in pricing, which in my experience did not necessarily reflect the quality of food.

† **LA GUARIDA**
Calle Concordia,
Centro Habana



cafés

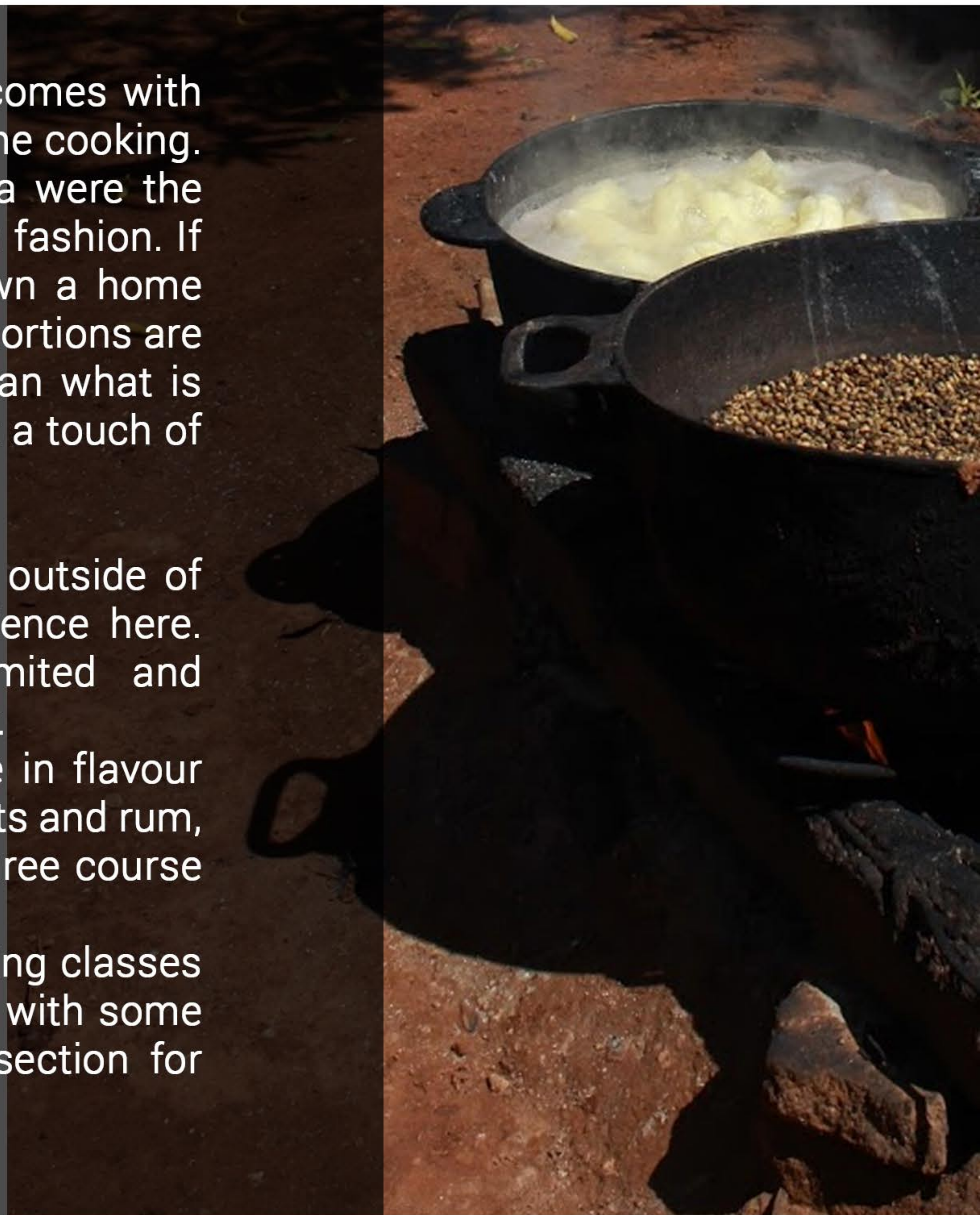
and lounges

Flooded with cafeterias, terraces and watering holes, the streets of Cuba are a true reflection of the vibrant culture. It is celebrated in the art, diversity and unique atmospheres created in some of my favourite cafes and lounges. Try a rich traditional coffee at *Cafe O'Reilly* (Old Havana) or enjoy live jazz music while drinking a daiquiri at *Sia Kara Café* (Central Havana). You'll be sure to bump into some great people - perhaps a lovely flight attendant from Germany or a fascinating guidebook author from Brazil! The cities' cafes are melting pots of global encounters, food, music, art, and positive vibes.

home cooking

The Casa Particular experience often comes with an unmatched advantage for me: home cooking. Some of the best meals I had in Cuba were the ones cooked by my hosts in real Cuban fashion. If you have the chance, do not turn down a home cooked meal with a Cuban family. The portions are often much nicer and better priced than what is offered at restaurants. You will also get a touch of that extra ingredient, love!

However, if you have had Cuban food outside of Cuba, do not expect the same experience here. Ingredients and food items are limited and expensive for the average Cuban family. Nevertheless, Cuban cuisine is diverse in flavour and quite experimental. From guava tarts and rum, to ropa viejas and yucca drinks, any three course will always have an exciting item. Food enthusiasts can sign up for cooking classes around the city or experiment at home with some local ingredients. See my 'Groceries' section for more details.



A painting of a woman in traditional Cuban attire, including a white headscarf with a red flower and a red dress. She is holding a large, lit cigar in her mouth, and a plume of white smoke rises from the end. The background is dark and textured.

rum

and cigars

Although not a cuisine per se, rum and cigars are a strong part of the Cuban culture and culinary experience. Infamous for their lavish cigar collections and some of the finest rum in the region, Cubans certainly know how to unwind and enjoy themselves. The most common rum is Havana Club (also try Santiago de Cuba rum), while the Cohiba is the finest quality cigar and an old favourite of Fidel Castro. To find out more about this culture in Cuba, it might be worth visiting the Rum Museum or the Partagas Cigar Factory in Old Havana. Best of all was the authentic tobacco tour in the Viñales Valley where I also tried rum made from guavas; see my 'Discovering Viñales' chapter for more.

You'll likely be approached on the street to buy cigars. While some are genuine offers, many of them are fake cigars made of banana leaves not tobacco. Do not pay for items you have not crosschecked or services you have not fully understood.



ART *and* MUSIC

Creatives in Cuba are using the arts beyond self-expression to tackle social issues, empower themselves and celebrate their culture. The fusion of cultures and ethnicities present in the country provide for a diverse and fascinating scene; one of my favourite to have ever explored!

street art

The character and blend of the Havana's architectural aesthetic adds a unique dimension to street art in the city. Playful graffiti and experimental art contrasts more somber messages and political statements plastered on weathered buildings. An interesting aspect is the lack of mass advertisement in Cuba, enforced by the government who've erected billboards aimed at celebrating socialism in Cuba. Installations are also found throughout the city but a passion for visual arts is nurtured in several hubs around town which every art enthusiast should check (at least one!).

POINTS OF INTEREST:

- I. CALLEJÓN DE HAMEL
- II. MURALEANDO
- III. FUSTERLANDIA
- IV. PRADO STREET
- V. OLD HAVANA



live music

While living in center city Havana, my morning alarm was often lively street music to get the day started. In the evenings, lingering through the cobble streets of Old Havana are sounds of jazz, salsa and soulful live music. Cuban music is heavily influenced by African and European (Spanish) traditions and embedded strongly in the culture. Known for its independent spirit, Cuban live music culture is likely nurtured by the lack of access to mass telecommunication channels, keeping local artists innovative and at the public forefront. Live music bars are scattered around the city but you'll always be sure to run into a solo artist jamming on a guitar or a talented band dancing and singing their hearts out. For recommendations such as the famous *Buena Vista Social Club* and the likes, see the 'Nightlife' section of this travelogue.



studios

and lessons



On a short trip, I highly recommend taking a masterclass or lesson in an art or creative skill that interests you. Whether it is a Rhumba drumming lessons, or a rum masterclass at a bar in the trendy district of Vedado, this type of experience will allow you to explore firsthand while interacting with new people. While classes can get quite pricey, they are often worth the crash course. For those on a budget, consider visiting public artist studios or interacting with musicians and creatives in the field -- they would likely lead to underground spots, private events, and further friendly connections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

MUSIC:

Agencia de Rap (Centro Havana)
Casa de La Rhumba (Centro Havana)

ART:

Fabrica de Arte Cubano (Vedado) - live shows, art exhibitions, fashion shows, and a trendy nightclub on Thursdays through Sundays, from 8PM onwards.

Art studios & stalls on Prado Street (Old Havana)

Visual Artist Contact (provides lessons):

Yasmani (Hassán) Aguila Jiménez

Cell: +5353200350

Email: yhassan@nauta.com.cu

See 'Resources' section for more.

MEETING PEOPLE

Exploring solo can be tricky and even lonely especially for longer stays. I found the Cuban people to be very welcoming and curious about foreigners, often reminding me of back home. However it is important to distinguish the hustlers from the genuine smiles and conversations you often encounter on the Malecón for example. Every evening around sunset, young people flock to the sea wall (Malecón) to share music, meet people and enjoy the fresh breeze.

Among the best encounters I had was meeting a young couple visiting Cuba on their anniversary. Be prepared to meet people from all walks of life with fascinating stories and even paths that have been mutually crossed! I am so thankful to have shared my last 3 days with the couple (Djoye and Prentice) who showed me a new side of Havana I wouldn't have seen otherwise, along with our Cuban friend Eduardo. I learnt to stay open minded and positive, for similar energies to naturally attract!



DISCOVERING HAVANA

Vintage cars, classical architecture, salsa music, flavourful cigars, straw hats, fresh rum drinks, and vibrant streets is the branded image of the city of Havana. All this and more is what this charming city blessed me with. Discovering the harsh realities of everyday life as well as the glamour and luxuries, it was evident that Havana is a complex city like no other. For me, it was a time travelling experience that ignited a consciousness to learn from history and strive for a deeper essence to everyday life.





museums and sites

MY TOP FIVE:

MUSEO DE LA REVOLUCIÓN
Havana Vieja

MUSEO DE BELLA ARTES CUBANO
Havana Vieja

CASTILLO DE LOS TRES REYES DEL MORRO
Havana Vieja

CASA DEL CHE
Casa Blanca

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO
Centro Havana

where to eat

With a wide variety of restaurant ambiance to choose from, Havana continuous to show off its complex nature in this regard. Many privately run and experimental restaurants are up and coming, several of which I was able to check out and was certainly not disappointed.

My Top 5 Restaurants:

HAVANA BLUES
Vedado District

SAN CRISTOBAL
Centro Havana

LA CONCORDIA
Centro Havana

ART PUB
Centro Havana

LA JULIANA
Centro Havana

Others:

Casa Miglis, El Chanchullero, La Bodeguita Del Medio, El Cocinero, Sia Kara Café, Los Nardos, Don Cangrejo, Coppelia (Ice Cream), etc.

nightlife

If you are looking for American pop, RnB, hiphop and the like, it is known by the locals as “moña”. But for short visits, I recommend indulging in the local music as it is one of the most vibrant musical cultures I’ve ever experienced. From Salsa bars, to live Jazz shows and Rumba on the streets, Havana is a certainly a city that never sleeps.

MY TOP 5 SPOTS:

KingBar
Several on Calle 23 / Vedado district
La Guarida (Rooftop Bar)
Fabrica de Arte Cubano (FAC)
El Floridita Bar

OTHER SPOTS:

La Zorra y El Cuervo, Corner Cafe, Café Tilín, Sofia, La Gruta, Bar Escencia, Buena Vista Social Club, Jardin 1830, Cafe Fresa y Chocolate, Sia Kara Cafe, Encuentro, Cafe Berthold Brecht

day trips

Beach Trip

Located just 30 minutes outside the center of Havana is a strip of lively sandy beaches known as Playas Del Este. The most popular of them is *Playa de Santa Maria* which has several activities and food stands available. The best way to get there is either by private taxi hire or more economically by bus. The Transtur bus runs frequently from the central park (Parque Central) and costs 5CUC for a return ticket to the beach which you can pay for on the bus.

Casa Blanca

A short and cheap ferry ride away from the dock in Old Havana (Terminal de Ferris), are several neighbourhoods with rich Cuban cultures, less 'touristy' vibes, and spectacular views of the city. A one day trip to these recommended districts is enough to see most of their highlights.

Docking in *Casa Blanca*, you can take a hike up the hill to admire the "El Cristo de La Habana" massive marble sculpture which overlooks the city, slightly similar to that in Rio de Janeiro. Each piece of marble was sculpted in Rome, blessed by the XII Pope, and inaugurated in Casa Blanca Havana in 1958.

Close to the statue is the former 1959 Havana home of Cuban revolutionary *Ernesto 'Che' Guevara*, now known as 'Casa del Che'. The house is now a small museum (6 CUC entry fee) with incredible replicas and artefacts, including the original box in which Che's remains were returned to Cuba in after he was killed in Bolivia, and a series of large painting by famous Cuban artists. The spectacular view of Havana from this point in itself is definitely worth the visit!



afro cuban CULTURE

Santería

Regla + Guanabacoa

The ferry also docks in Regla, a municipality significant to AfroCuban religion and culture of Cuba. Adjacent is the district of Guanabacoa, site of a skirmish British and Spanish troops during the Battle of Havana, and home to the first cabildos de nación: African ethnic associations created in the late 16th century. Regla and Guanabacoa host significant AfroCuban sites which were fascinating to explore and discover links to my own African heritage.

Santería, meaning 'worship of the saints', is a widely practiced Afro-American religion of the Caribbean which fuses indigenous African and Roman Catholic beliefs. It was developed by enslaved Yoruba people in Cuba who were banned from practicing their religious customs and in turn syncretized their Orishas with Catholic saints in order to preserve their belief system. Today, it is common to see believers who are undergoing some form of healing and wearing all white attire around town.

Regla is home to the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Regla* where you find a main altar to the Yoruba goddess Yemaya. I observed the *Iyalawos* (female *Babalawo*), the title for Santería priests, perform their spiritual ceremonies outside the church as well as share spiritual wisdom and guidance with believers in the Santería sacred language of Lucumi, a variety of the Yoruba language of modern day Nigeria. Another practice I was told about when introducing myself as Cameroonian was *Abakuá*, a popular Afro-Cuban fraternity that originated from associations in southwestern Cameroon. These religious links, although controversial even within Cuba, are evidence of direct lineage and shared history across continents.



afro cuban CULTURE

Cont'd

Beyond Regla and Guanabacoa, central Havana also has an active AfroCuban population. I spent a day with Yani, an AfroCuban girl from *Guantanamo* whom I met in a bank queue. She was trying to send money to her mother back home, a complicated process which requires a lot of paperwork, money and government regulation. She gave me insight into the obstacles she faces as a young black female in Cuba. Unable to find work like many qualified Cubans, Yani had recently moved to Havana after finishing her 5 year degree in Nutritional Science. She shared with me how many locals would struggle to understand how a 22 year-old African female student like me can manage to come out here while the majority of Cubans have never left the country. While racism is rarely confronted in Cuba, there is an evident divide in a population where many AfroCubans settlements are significantly poorer. The African-influence, 'black' and *mulatto* population in Havana have a heavy presence, but the true hub is said to be the town of *Santiago de Cuba*, a town close to Yani's home Guantanamo, and about a 14 hours drive or a short flight away from Havana. Though I was unable to make the trip out there, I selected a few Afro-Cuban cultural sights in Havana to explore as it was a key area of anthropological interest for me on this trip :



Callejón de Hamel is a community project created by Cuban artist *Salvador Gonzáles Escalona* in 1990. In addition to the eco-friendly art installations along the alley, psychedelic murals, and traditional restaurants, it is also an AfroCuban temple to the *Orishas* (Santería deities). Every Sunday from noon to 3pm, rumba music livens up the alley and people flock to dance and educate visitors on AfroCuban beliefs and customs. You can try a 'mystic' AfroCuban beverage here: *Negrón* or *Aguardiente*.

* Be weary of hustlers & overpriced services.


Casa De África is a small state-owned museum housing a large collection of gifts from African heads of states as well as ethnographic items from the African continent. The museum doesn't seem to garner much attention from tourists but I spent some time tracing and understanding Cuba's links to Africa. I was pleasantly surprised to find a Tikar mask from Cameroon but also some rare heritage items that may be controversial.

* The museum is free but be prepared to tip the underpaid staff.

architecture

As a UNESCO World Heritage site, Old Havana is dazzled with grand baroque, neoclassical, and art deco buildings that reflect a fusion of influences reminiscent of its demographic. The city has conserved decades of history in the layered walls and variations of periods it underwent. For a great taste of classical architecture, visit the Universidad de La Habana's main 'Alma Mater' building in Vedado District. Courtyards, elegant balconies, European-like plazas, and pastel-colored walls are the charm of the city that was once dubbed the 'Paris of the Caribbean'. Juxtaposed in style and function, with family homes spread above vibrant boutiques and bars on high streets, a stroll through the city can create a sense of what almost feels like gentrification. But the complexity of Havana's history and ongoing stories go beyond that as you will discover. Other towns like Viñales are lined with colorful porches on one-story houses, many of which are Casas Particulares. Personally, I could not stop taking pictures of the raw, complex and glorious architecture!

naturaleza



Cuba is a nature lover's paradise. From tropical plants to colorful creatures and nature-inspired Caribbean art, there is an abundance of species and trails to explore. Beyond Havana's luscious botanical garden, take a few days if possible to visit Cuba's national conservation park and small town: Viñales.

DISCOVERING VIÑALES

A few hours outside the hustle and bustle of Havana is a small town in Pinar Del Río province, home to the Viñales Valley - a Cuban national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site. Viñales town is surrounded by rivers, caves, and vast landscapes of greenery and tropical climate. It has garnered international attention for its outstanding beauty and ecology, rich in flora and fauna, healing waters from hot springs and densely wooded hills. This is a perfect breather from city life in Havana and I was glad to have spent 5 days on excursions, discovering village life in Cuba.



Viñales

Excursions

Viñales' attractions and outdoor activities kept me active and refreshed while travelling. Waking up early mornings to avoid the harsh afternoon sun, I ventured out to see what has earned this village its cultural patrimony status. I recommend group or individual excursions booking through 'Paradiso Turismo Cultural' on the main street Salvador Cisneros. You can also sightsee on the Tur Viñales Bus (5CUC per day - excluding entrance fees) which leaves hourly from the Plaza de Viñales and allows you to hop on and off at most major sites. Another unique option is by Horse and Carriage (priced at 5CUC per day) with a vaquero (cowboy) but this is significantly slower and might only be sensible for visiting one site.

MY TOP FIVE MUST-SEES:

- I. CUEVA DEL INDIO
5CUC: includes guided cave boat tour
- II. HORSERIDING TOUR OF VINALES VALLEY
5CUC per hour for Tobacco + Coffee tour
- III. MURAL DE LA PREHISTORIA
6CUC: can view from outside
- IV. CANOPY TOUR
Zipline (bird's eye view) across the valley
- V. MIRADOR
Views from Hotel Los Jazmines or La Ermita

Others: Cuevas de Santo Tomas, Campismo Dos Hermanas (camping site), Birding in Finca San Vincente, Bike Tours, etc.

Excursions: **TOBACCO + COFFEE T O U R**

Among the major highlights of Viñales is the horse riding or walking tour of Viñales Valley. In addition to exploring the range of local rich vegetation, you can visit a tobacco house/farm to see how the finest Cuban cigars are handmade by artisans. After trying a freshly rolled cigar which has been sealed with honey, you can visit a coffee farmer for an authentic Cuban cup. Here you can also try a rare rum made from guava known as Guayabita, taste some freshly harvested yucca (cassava), a coco loco (coconut water + rum) or grilled lechón (pork). The tours includes an in depth explanation of the processes and an experience of village life; from the cowboys to the farmers to the live band serenading the hills surrounding the valley. Cigar enthusiasts, can be more certain of the authenticity of cigars when buying straight from the source where the majority of Cuban tobacco comes from.






Excursions: **CAYO JUTÍAS**

If you have enough days to spend in Viñales, consider taking a day trip to one of the keys/islands located a few hours away from the town. Although the journey to Cayo Jutías is quite an unpleasant 2 hours on some of the roughest roads I experienced in Cuba (expect lots of hills, valleys, and a bumpy ride on a thin strip connecting the key to mainland), it was still completely more than worth the visit. Cayo Jutías boasts of the clearest Caribbean seas, calm quiet shores and picturesque moments of relaxation. The beach doesn't get very crowded, likely due to difficult accessibility, so it can feel like a resort. Therefore, also expect high pricing and plenty of tourists. For example, a beach bed and umbrella was about 11 CUC, compared to 5 CUC at the beach in Havana.

Another popular beach is Cayo Levisa, located a little further away than Jutías. It is not accessible by vehicle but by a short ferry ride from mainland. Many tour companies arrange trips to both these destination but I decided to book a cheaper seat in a collective taxi truck which costed 15 CUC return. Not all cars are safe to drive on the road to Cayo Jutias so don't be lured into hiring a small taxi that just might break down! All in all, Cayo Jutias remains one of my most memorable experiences in Cuba.

the people

A photograph of an elderly man with a mustache, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a green button-down shirt. He is holding a thick wooden staff vertically in front of him with his right hand. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a lush, green outdoor setting with trees and foliage. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the lower right portion of the image.

While getting off the bus in Viñales, I was overwhelmed by a large group of people bombarding passengers with questions and tourist services. This first impression led me to view the locals as quite aggressive towards tourists. However, my perception quickly changed after more interactions to discover the people's deep curiosity about foreigners. The rise of tourism in the town has expanded horizons and opportunities and while this comes with some downfalls, the cheerful spirit of Cuba is still alive here over all.

where to eat

Although being in the luscious countryside, I unfortunately did not have the full culinary experience of Viñales. The reality of limited access to food throughout the country continues here, where variety is plentiful but locals cannot afford to buy much of it and the industry is inadequately developed for them (see the 'Groceries' section). Nevertheless, there is still a healthy selection for tourists and I found a few restaurants and cafes I particularly enjoyed and which each provided an exciting ambiance and social experience. The fresh fruit and produce including coffee, honey and rum in Viñales are among the finest I had. While I did not get the chance to try out an 'ecológica' (organic) restaurant, they were frequently recommended among the best places to eat.

TOP 3 EATERIES:

- I. Finca Agroecológica El Paraíso
- II. Tres Jotas (3J bar)
- III. Home-cooked Meals

Shopping souvenirs

Souvenir shopping is pretty standard worldwide: mass produced items, tshirts, sculptures, magnets, keychains and the like. In Viñales, be sure to carry some cigars, honey, rum, coffee and other local products as souvenirs. Note that there is a government enforced cap on how much you can take out of the country with you. Cigars for example are capped at 50 cigars, while rum is about 2 litres per person.

I also found items to be slightly cheaper in Viñales but more limited in range. Two main 'souvenir galore' spots I visited in Havana were: Almacenes San Jose and Calle Obispo.

ALMACENES SAN JOSE

Located by the ferry terminal in Old Havana, Almacenes San Jose is a giant warehouse of kiosks selling souvenir goods of all kinds. From authentic Cuban leather, carvings, printed bags and a range of decorations, this place is probably your best bet for an all inclusive shopping trip.

CALLE OBISPO

is a long street leading into Old Havana from the Central Park. It is a busy and crowded with many souvenir shops and boutiques on several adjacent streets. Due to its location, the pricing is more targeted at tourists but it is also acceptable to bargain for better prices which I certainly did! I highly recommend starting off at the Artisan Market where items are clearly labeled and better quality to me. My favourite part was the leather goods stalls where you can get items engraved and personalized.





Shopping vintage

Many souvenir items can be quite cliché and almost functionless. While I did grab a few, I was more excited to look through the vintage stores for more rare finds, wearable charms and unique decorations. From record stores on main streets, to old bookstores from private homes, any thrifter would love Cuba's assortment of story-filled antiques. Being the time capsule that it is, some items that are no longer sighted in many parts of the world are still commonly used in Cuba. This means vintage shopping can really take you all the way back; from preserved manuscripts and photo gadgets to timeless jewelry from colonial times.

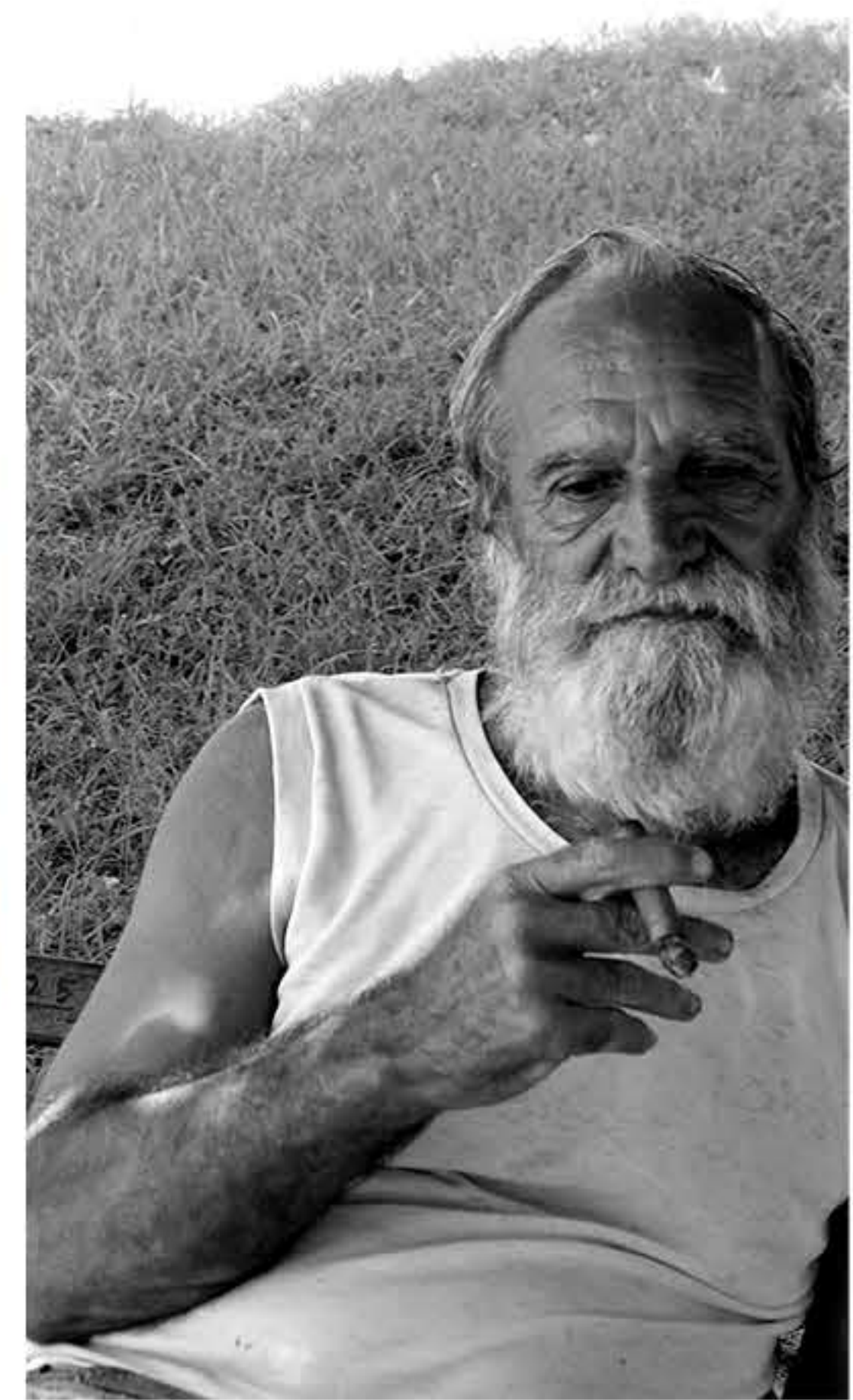
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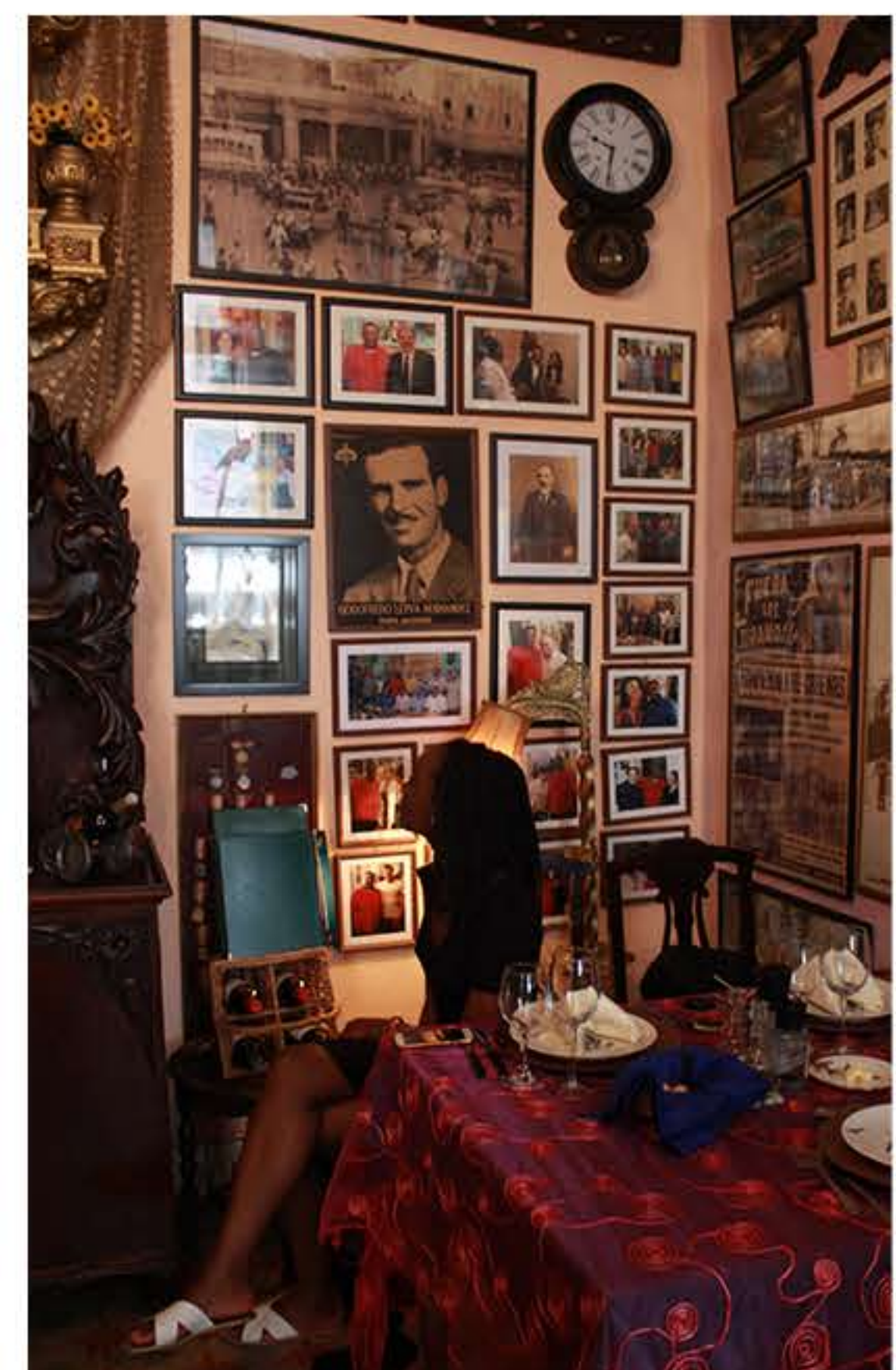
An experience that caught me off-guard in Cuba was lack of access to some basic food items. I was surprised to find out about frequent shortages of eggs, milk and water. Some locals explain that this is sometimes due to their welfare system that rations and distributes food to the population.

When choosing to stay in a self-catered Casa, be aware that there are no traditional 'supermarkets' in Cuba. Most food stock is bought in 'Mercados' (street/farmers markets), while several government-run shops will sell imported and national packaged products. I enjoyed going to the local street markets, though it may not be for everyone. Either way, be cautious of what products may be running out and always ask around. It could be wise to stock up on items you tend to use a lot in case you don't find it there the next day - this happened often in my case!



DOCUMENTING

The picturesque scenes of Cuba are what make it a photography playground. With so much raw beauty to capture, you do not want to forget your camera on your trip! I enjoyed people watching and capturing patterns and palettes that spoke to me. Be sure to consciously put away your technology once in awhile and find a balance in simply living the moment!





RESOURCES

MAKE A DONATION TO UNLOCK.
UNLOCK TO IMMEDIATELY RECEIVE ACCESS TO USEFUL LINKS FOR OFFLINE APPS, BREAKDOWN OF SERVICES + THE BEST CLASSES AND TOUR COMPANIES + PACKING CHECKLIST + MISCELLANEOUS TIPS FOR NAVIGATING CUBA.

DONATE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my family and support system who never stop encouraging my 'far-fetched' ideas and dreams, you are my motivation. To all those who continue to believe in my vision, showing your support financially, in prayer, and in mentorship, you are the blessing that made this trip possible. To my dearest friends who kept me positive through challenges in planning and following through with this adventure, you are the rarest gems. To my inspirators whose representation made me believe and stay determined, you have made me stronger. And most of all to the almighty creator of all great things and possibilities, I am forever thankful for this experience.

*thank
you.*



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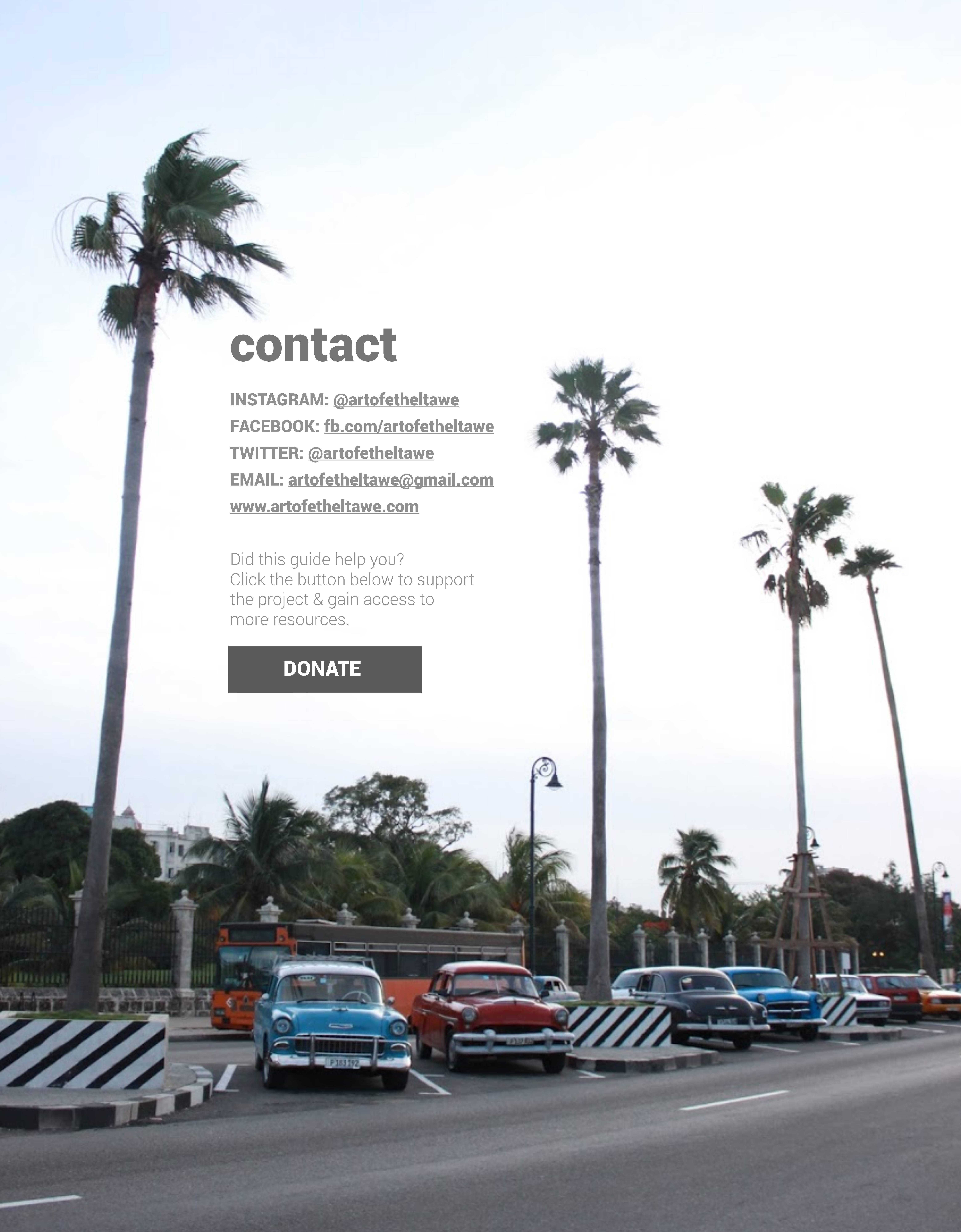
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