

Travel

Not just cool cars and cigars

TIME WARP: Cruising the Malecón in Havana where Gloria Estefan, far right, was born

There are three things you have to do in Cuba. The first is go to the beach. The second is to drink. Mojitos, beer or whatever. The third thing you have to do is dance. You have to dance in Cuba.'

Our guide Lemay is issuing instructions from the front of the bus as we leave Havana for the northern Cayos of Cuba. We landed in Havana two nights ago and most of us have done two of the things already. You can't help it, music and mojitos seem to

'Go to the beach, drink and dance' proves sage advice in Cuba's cities and paradise cayos alike, discovers **Yvonne Gordon**

get into your bones. We're now heading for the beach.

Our first taste of Havana was a morning drive on the Malecón, a wall that stretches for eight kilometres along the seafront. People come here to relax, to fish, to watch

the sunset and to socialise – it's packed at night, especially at weekends. The roads are full of old cars and a queue at the lights looks more like a vintage car rally – all colourful classic American Chevrolets and Cadillacs with polished chrome

and tail fins.

We walked through the shaded narrow streets of the old city, starting at San Francisco square, a colonial plaza named after St Francis of

Turn to Page 78 >>

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So, later this week Benedict will be vacating his palatial living quarters and moving to a monastery – the Mater Ecclesiae – that lies at the heart of the Vatican Gardens. Well, lucky him. Can you imagine anything more delightful than waking up every morning in such a beautiful setting – more than 50 acres planted with the most magnificent flora that you can imagine?

There's nothing quite like a green oasis in the middle of an urban sprawl – we have our own here in Dublin, of course, in the shape of St Stephen's Green. But when we visit foreign cities we don't always take the time to check out these little (or often large) escape areas. Yet it's a brilliant thing to do, and often a great place to people-watch.

In Madrid, for example, if you visit for a weekend you will probably be busy visiting the art galleries, doing a tapas crawl through the Latina district, taking in the beautiful palace and shopping in the Rastro street market on a Sunday morning. But you really should take the time to wander along to the Real Jardín Botánico – right in the city centre. This 18th century botanical garden is a real beauty – not huge, but with a number of planted terraces and a lovely central pavilion, it is a wonderful place to escape the city throngs.

Of course, when it comes to Spanish gardens it's hard to beat those of the Alhambra in Granada. Here, however, in the grounds of the 14th century Moorish palace, it's

Nothing is as refreshing as an oasis amid urban sprawl



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more about atmosphere, architecture and trickling water than actual plant-life but it is undoubtedly one of the most impressive places in all of Spain.

I love the Boboli Gardens in Florence. You'll find them to the rear of the Pitti Palace, just across the River Arno from the Uffizi Gallery. These gardens are huge – about 11 acres in total and quite formal in their layout. Again, they are steeped in history, having been the brainchild of Eleonora di Toledo, who was the wife of Cosimo di Medici. It's a wonderful place to wander on a hot Florentine afternoon, seeking shade along the tree-planted avenues and admiring the many, many sculptures.

You don't associate north Africa with pristine and

beautiful gardens but if you are in Marrakech you shouldn't miss the Majorelle Gardens on the edge of the city. Developed by Majorelle, the eponymous French artist, in the 1920s, these gardens boast an extraordinary collection of cacti and a museum of Islamic art. Well worth a detour from the frenzy of the Marrakech souk.

Somewhere else worth a detour are the Alfabia gardens in Mallorca. Located about ten miles from Palma, this is a gorgeous place, the Moorish gardens spreading out from what was once a country manor house. Citrus groves, unusual varieties of palm trees, beautiful beds of fragrant roses and water features galore – they're all here in this quiet haven, the perfect place to step off life's merry-go-round and take some reflective time out.

For there's something, after all, about beautiful gardens and quiet contemplation. No surprise then that Benedict is now opting for such a place to live out his days. May he blossom there.



ON THE WATERFRONT:
Youths cool off in the sea along the Malecón in Havana where Yvonne loved the vintage cars



We watch as skilled hands roll, press then trim cigars

» From Page 77

Assisi. This part of Old Havana has been restored with pastel pink, blue and lemon yellow façades, balconies overflowing with flowers and old street lamps.

Along the Calle de los Oficios, I peek through a large wooden door to see a peacock strutting around a courtyard with his feathers flared. I soon learn that not much is surprising in this city – as Graham Greene wrote 'anything is possible in Havana'. Further along, an old man sits in a doorway sucking on a cigar. The smell lingers in the warm air and mingles with the strains of music coming from the end of the street.

Music is synonymous with the country that counts Queen of Latin pop Gloria Estefan among its most famous exiles. Estefan's father was a bodyguard to Fulgencio Batista who was overthrown by Fidel Castro in 1959 in the Cuban revolution causing Gloria's family to flee Havana for Miami when she was two years of age. She is outspoken in her criticism of Castro's regime and has called for Cuban freedom.

Plaza de Armas, the city's oldest square, is lined with stalls of books either about or by Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Ernest Hemingway. In the centre, three Cuban guitarists strum energetically in the shade of some trees while birds overhead tweet loudly in competition. Passing women shelter from the sun beneath rain umbrellas. A jinetero, or hustler, approaches us to sell cigars.

Suddenly everyone is focused on a curvy black woman in a bright yellow colonial costume with a large flower in her hair who is posing for photos to earn some pesos. It's a spectacle of music and colour and it's not yet noon.

This is typical Havana. It seems that everywhere we go there's something going on; a gathering of vintage cars, a band, colourful characters and cigar smoke. We lunch at Hemingway's old haunt, Bodeguita del Medio, where the mojito was apparently invented. It's packed downstairs where the barmen pass the rum drinks over people's heads. Upstairs, the airy restaurant's



GUARD:
Che watches over a cigar tester

walls are signed by past visitors.

After two days in the city, we're heading east for the province of Villa Clara. In Santa Clara, home to 300,000 people, is Parque Vidal, a large, central square. We arrive to an orchestra in full swing as young and old mill around chatting and enjoying the music.

A colonial character on stilts poses for photos, locals gossip beneath parasols, old men sell fruit from bicycle carts and benches are lined with young and old soaking up the atmosphere. Cultural attractions surround the square – the Martí Library in the Palacio, the Decorative Arts Museum and La Caridad theatre. At La Marquesina bar on the corner, four musicians play under a giant Cuban flag with Che Guevara's

Glide along spotting starfish on the seabed

GETTING THERE

Return flights to **Havana** from Dublin via Paris or Amsterdam start from €676pp with KLM and Air France. See klm.com or airfrance.ie for details and booking. A double room at the **Quinta Avenida Habana Hotel**, Havana costs from €110 per night, see sunway.ie or call (01) 231 1800. Seven all-inclusive nights at **Hotel Memories Paraiso** in Cayo Santa Maria costs from €779pps. See GoHop.ie or call (01) 241 2389. Seven nights at Hotel Meliá Cayo Guillermo, Jardines del Rey, pictured inset, costs from €525pps, see cubatravel.ie or call (01) 241 2341 for reservations or more information.



ESCAPE: Ernest Hemingway and his wife Martha Gellhorn in Cuba in the 1940s



image on it.

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara is much celebrated here and his image is everywhere. Just outside the city is a memorial dedicated to the Argentinian revolutionary of Irish-Spanish descent who joined Fidel Castro to lead the 1959 revolution. Guevara was killed in Bolivia in 1967 and his ashes are interred here along with those of his fellow combatants. There's also a statue, a mural and a museum with photos and memorabilia from his childhood, medical career and military campaigns.

Back on the road, we set off for a cigar factory in Camaguey. The best tobacco in the world grows in Cuban soil and most of it goes into cigars rather than cigarettes. Lemay explains how tobacco leaves take about five years to mature enough to go into a cigar. The contributory skills of everyone involved in their production are vitally important: from the farmers to the blender who creates different aromas and brands. How to mix for a Cohiba

or a Monte Cristo is apparently a closely guarded secret known only to a select few.

It's evening when we arrive and the cigar factory is hot and dimly lit, with rows of male and female cigar makers of all ages at wooden tables and chairs. Everything is done by hand, there are no machines.

The air is filled with the swish and crackle of the leaves being crumpled together, the clack of cutters on wooden benches, the thump of cigar moulds being stacked, chatting voices and the noise from the street outside. Music from a nearby bar wafts through the open windows mixing with the pungent smell of raw tobacco.

We watch as skilled hands roll cigar after cigar, adding them to moulds to be pressed then trimmed. At the back, the draw-master checks the suction of the cigars and, in a side room, two tasters, a man and a woman, sit and slowly smoke cigars

creating an atmospheric cloud under a painted mural of Che.

That night, we head north to Cayo Santa Maria, an island paradise and Cuba's newest holiday resort. The Cuban archipelago has more than 4,000 keys and islands and it is the warm, emerald-tinted waters, pristine white beaches and coconut trees, as well as different fish species and coral reefs, that have been drawing visitors to the northern Cayos since it opened up to tourists.

North of the central Villa Clara province, Cayo Santa Maria is linked to the mainland by a 48km-long causeway which took 10 years to build and was finished in 1999.

The 13km-long cay is dotted with mangrove swamps, sandy beaches, diving reefs and resorts. Our base is the Hotel Memories Paraiso, an all-inclusive colonial style resort opened two years ago. It's very different from the Cuba we've just left. The hotel complex is huge and features a host of restaurants, bars, a large swimming

pool and a beach. From the nearby marina at Cayo Las Brujas, you can take a boat trip or go fishing for barracudas, snappers and groupers.

We go sailing on a 64-foot catamaran yacht. The crew catch fish and mix cocktails while we relax and glide along in the sun spotting starfish on the seabed. We snorkel at the wreck of an old steamboat where the coral is fascinating and an amusingly inquisitive striped fish swims right up to my mask to take a closer look.

We also visit two cays to the east in the Jardines del Rey (King's Gardens) archipelago. Scuba diving is popular in the warm waters of Cayo Coco, while Cayo Guillermo was the setting for Hemingway's novel Islands In The Stream and is home to Pilar beach, one of Cuba's finest, where the sea is striped green and blue along a sandy white shore. Each of these Cayos hosts all-inclusive resorts and more are being built to meet demand.

Cuba hasn't been immune to the worldwide economic crisis, however with its history, culture, natural beauty and tropical climate, tourism is growing – up 7.3% in 2011. It's a fascinating country to visit – some things, like the greenery along the roads or the people's sense of humour, remind me of home. At other times, it's like visiting a different era; there are no advertising hoardings, very few computers, shops or modern cars, and people aren't glued to mobile phones. It's all very calm and uncommercial.

Whether you visit the cities or head to the northern Cayos for a taste of paradise, the three most important things to remember remain: Go to the beach, drink mojitos, and dance. You simply won't be able to help yourself.

GREEN PRIDE:
Parade your nationality with pride when New York turns green for St Patrick's Day. The Hotel @ Times Square offers rooms from €77pp per night in March and is just a block from the parade route, see thehotelatmssquare.co.uk. You could also catch the premiere of Broken, starring Cillian Murphy and Tim Roth, as part of the three-day Craic Festival at the Tribeca cinemas. One-way flights cost from €239 with Aer Lingus.

GREEN HIDE:
Go in search of a very different kind of green with a game of glow-in-the-dark golf at the Turtle Hill Golf Club at the Fairmont Southampton – Southampton, Bermuda, that is. Guests use rental clubs and glowing balls for the

Great ESCAPES

Texas Scramble tournament and are guided around the par-3 course by glowing beacons. For those who pride themselves on their short game the course is hosting the World Par-3 Championship on March 22-24. See fairmont.com for more.

HIDE & HUNT:
Eggscape to the Malton in Killarney for two nights at Easter for €165 per adult and €70 per child. Egg hunts, a magician and all kinds of treats will be laid on. See themalton.com.

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