



CUBA LIBRE

Evening dining at Melia, Cayo Santa Maria

A heady mix of beautiful beaches, lively culture and colourful history make Cuba a memorable honeymoon destination, writes Yvonne Gordon

If sunshine, white sandy beaches, warm turquoise waters, starry nights and a rich culture and heritage are on your wish list for your honeymoon, then you'll love the romance of Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean.

Cuba has more than 300 beaches, with beautiful clear waters full of coral reefs and colourful fish, perfect for swimming, snorkelling or diving. It also has around 330 sunny days a year, with the average air and water temperature a balmy 25°C.

Varadero is Cuba's best known resort area, but for a more exclusive, peaceful honeymoon, head to the beautiful Cayos to the north of the island. The Jardines del Rey, discovered by the Spaniards around 1514 and named in honour of their monarch Ferdinand, is one of the largest and most beautiful archipelagos in Cuba. With tropical beauty and distinctive flora and fauna, these islands are the ideal place to relax and unwind, with coconut trees, mangroves, coral reefs and emerald waters.

As well as relaxing and escaping to the cayos for some sun, sea and sand, soak up some of Cuba's music, culture and heritage, all key ingredients for a honeymoon to remember.

ISLANDS IN THE STREAM

Jardines Del Rey is an archipelago of tropical islands. Cayo Coco is the largest island, with 22 kilometres of pristine beaches including the famous Pilar beach with white sands, huge dunes and blue-green waters. On the smaller neighbouring island, Cayo Guillermo, there is a shorter beach with tall dunes and a long coral reef for diving. The cayos were the setting for the Hemingway novel *Islands In The Stream*.

Cayo Coco has a small airport and both Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo can be reached by road as they are linked to the mainland by causeway. The newest island resort area, Cayo Santa Maria, has immaculate beaches as well as bird colonies, mangrove swamps, emerald-tinted waters and diving reefs. It's also linked to the mainland by a long causeway.

Romantic Highlights

- ♥ Spend the day on a **catamaran cruise** visiting small islands, stopping to snorkel on a coral reef and lunch on a secluded beach. A more romantic cruise in the evening sets off at around 4.30pm and includes a lobster dinner and drinks on board.
- ♥ Get pampered at **Acuavida Spa Talaso** (Thalaso-therapy spa) in Cayo Coco which has a range of body treatments, massages and hydrotherapy in a beautiful seaside setting. The couple's programme includes massages, manicures and pedicures. The spa also offers underwater massage, mud therapy, steam baths and outdoor pools. To book, check with your hotel.
- ♥ Take a day trip to **Ciego de Avila**. The trip starts with a speedboat ride on La Redonda Lake and a visit to a cigar factory in the city. Tour the city centre by bicycle taxi, and end the day with a visit to the sugar factory, where a steam train will take you to a restaurant for an evening meal.

THOSE LITTLE EXTRAS

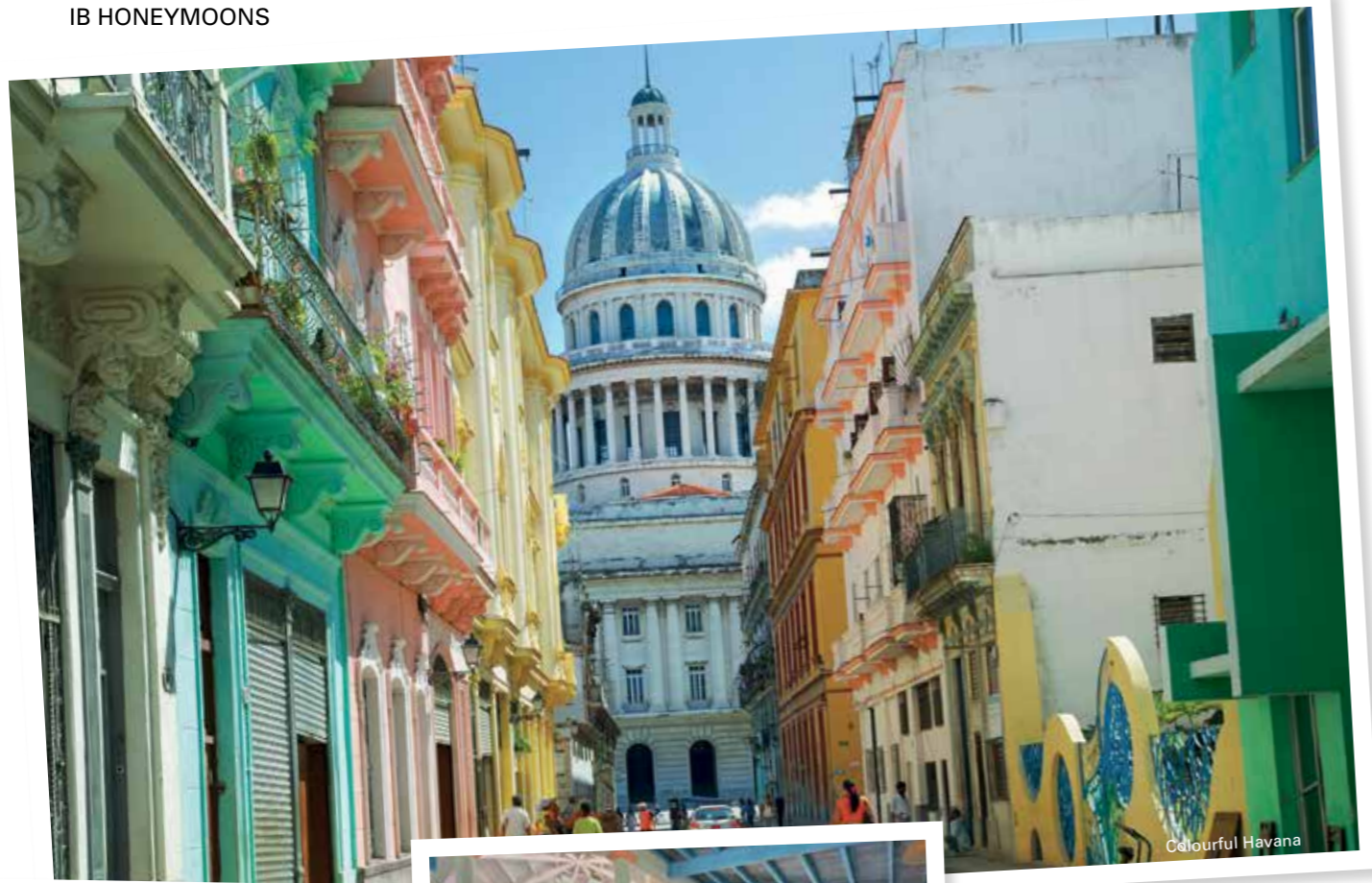
All of the cayos have all-inclusive resorts, some adult-only, and many of the hotels will offer upgrades to honeymooners and treats such as a welcome cocktail, late check out, flowers and cava in the room. A typical hotel on the cayos is Hotel Memorias Paraiso Azul in Cayo Santa Maria, an all-inclusive colonial style resort. The hotel has restaurants, bars, a large pool and a beach and all of the hotels will arrange your excursions and activities.

Take a sunset boat trip or go fishing for barracuda and snappers from the nearby marina at Cayo Las Brujas. Join a 64-foot catamaran yacht for an afternoon cruise, stopping for snorkelling at a coral-covered shipwreck on the sea bed, and enjoy cocktails at sunset while the crew look after the sails and catch the odd fish.

SWEET DAY TRIPS

Take a day trip from the cayos to the city of Remedios, about an hour's drive from Cayo Santa Maria. The town was built around the sugar industry, Cuba's main crop, so start your visit at the Museum of Sugar Industry, home of a sugar factory which was built in 1821.

From here, you can take a steam train through sugar plantations and farmland to Remedios town itself, which was discovered around 1513. It's a vibrant town, with old colonial buildings and streets full of bicycle taxis, fruit and vegetable sellers and women sheltering from the sun under colourful umbrellas. Musicians play on terraces in bars in the main



Colourful Havana



Cuban town



Melia, Cayo Santa Maria, Lobby



Melia, Cayo Santa Maria, Pool

square, where old people often gather to chat or smoke a cigar. The square is also home to a church which was built in 1550 which is worth seeing for its beautiful gold altar and ornate cedar ceiling.

Santa Clara is also a lovely town to visit, with a colourful main square. Just outside the town is the mausoleum and memorial to the revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara, who was killed in Bolivia in 1967, with a museum telling the story of his life.

HAVANA GOOD TIME

Before you head for the beach, stop for a night or two in Havana, the capital of Cuba. You can spend a day or two exploring Old Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage site, full of narrow streets and colourful squares. Eat and drink in Hemingway haunts such as Floridita, home of the daiquiri, or the traditional restaurant, La Bodeguita del Medio. Take in some Cuban music and a sunset walk along the sea wall at the Malecón, to see the old colonial buildings and the 1950's classic cars driving along the seafront boulevard.

WHEN TO GO

December to May is dry season and high season. June to November is wet season so expect heat and humidity, but lower prices.

Book it



Two weeks all-inclusive at the five-star Memories Paraiso Azul in Cayo Santa Maria, including flights from Dublin or Cork, return flights to the cayos and two nights in Havana starts from €1,229 per person sharing plus €470 taxes and visas, between May 1 and June 30. A similar two-week package at Melia Santa Maria starts from €1,539 pps and two weeks at Melia Cayo Coco or Cayo Guillermo starts from €1,609 plus tax and visas. Call 353 (1) 241 2340 or see cubatravel.ie ■