

SUNDAY

LIFE

FOOD

TRAVEL

INGEAR

OUR JAM IN HAVANA

Yvonne Gordon
takes a musical trip
across Cuba | p17

LAURELS AND ARDEE

The Louth locals
who got together to
make a movie | p6

NEITHER GRAPE NOR GRAIN

The Wicklow wine wowing
chefs and sommeliers | p9

WAR ON PLUGS

Graeme Lennox loves the new
BMW electric supermini, but where
are all the charging bays? | p32

TRAVEL

Intrigued by the rhythms and beats of Cuba, itchy-footed Dubliner **Yvonne Gordon** set about dancing across the most musical of the Caribbean islands



WING IT

Yours for €1.3m — a limited-edition private jet
P22

Kicking up a salsa in my Cuban heels

Right notes
Street musicians
in Santiago
de Cuba

'Uno, dos, tres..." Roger, our guide, counted us onto the bus. "Bang, bang, bang." Some workmen were hammering on a nearby roof. Suddenly, it all sounded like a salsa rhythm. I expected Roger to continue — "1-2-3 . . . 5-6-7 . . ." and then repeat the phrase. When I heard the hammering, for a second it became the sound of drums and my feet were itching to move to the beat. We were on a small street in Santiago de Cuba, a city at the foot of the island, 870 kilometres from the capital Havana, on a tour to learn all about the island through its music and dance. It was hot, dusty and noisy with traffic and building work. There were people out on the street, chatting and calling out. A three-wheeled bicycle was parked up outside the bright blue guesthouse where we were staying and on the corner, two men were selling vegetables from a

→ wooden cart fixed an umbrella. The traffic, building noises and Roger’s counting were all everyday sounds but now everything seemed to be part of the same rhythm, tapping, banging, beeping.

Anyone who has been to Cuba will know that you can’t go long without hearing music; sometimes the gap is only minutes. There’s a live band in nearly every bar and at least one in every park and there are strains of music in the background of many streets, sometimes from open windows. The tunes are often familiar chestnuts like Dos Gardenias and Guantanamera.

The last time I was in Cuba I was so captivated by all the live music, I wanted to come back and learn more about it, to appreciate why it’s such a big part of the culture, so this time I joined a tour with 11 others, to travel the island and explore its music and dance.

Roger explained to us how Santiago is the home of son, a style of music and dance that became popular in the 1920s and 1930s, with a mix of influences from Spanish music and Afro-Caribbean beats. It was the forerunner of many modern forms of Latin American music, such as salsa. The clave rhythm was at its heart, with instruments such as bongos, guitar, tres (another guitar-like instrument), maracas, claves and double bass, plus singers. Later a trumpet was added to the line-up, and in the 1940s, the popularity of jazz and American music introduced the big bands to Cuba, the louder piano replacing the tres.

We started the tour in Havana, where I’d first spent a couple of days with friends. I was mesmerised watching locals dance Cuban salsa in the different nightclubs we visited, as we stood in the shadows, shuffling our feet to the rhythm while dancers swung, turned, dipped and swivelled their hips all around us in a sometimes hot and steamy whirl.



Benjamin Rondel; Holger Leue; Jeremy Woodhouse; Alamy



By day, the tourists strolled Calle Obispo in Old Havana, browsing craft and book shops and hearing live music on nearly every corner. After dark, the street came alive with live bands of three or four musicians in every bar. A seafront stroll along the Malecón one evening brought us to the art deco 1930s Hotel Nacional in Vedado for sunset mojitos, where the obligatory musical trio goes around the tables to perform.

I was based at the nearby Hotel Tryp Habana Libre, which opened in March 1958 as the Havana Hilton, the tallest and largest hotel in Latin America. With the Cuban revolution less than a year later in 1959, the hotel became Fidel Castro’s headquarters for a short time and was eventually taken over by a Spanish chain. It still has 1950s’ character — and like much of Cuba, the infrastructure, such as its lifts and phones, is 1950s’-style, too — but what I loved most was the live piano player every morning at breakfast.

Air tunes
Street musicians in Trinidad play a range of Cuban instruments, above; the Hotel Tryp Habana Libre, below; street art of the revolutionary leader Che Guevara, below left, in Havana

A few days later, our tour started and we left Havana in a small bus for Trinidad, in the centre of the island, on the Caribbean coast. We explored the long, cobbled streets there, famous for the single storey colonial-style houses painted in bright yellows, blues, greens and reds and for palm trees in central squares. Trinidad’s pace of life is slow; the tourists fewer than Havana. As well as the vintage cars on every street, people travel by horse and trap, donkey, scooter, bicycle and tractor. Under blue skies and hot sun, street sellers offered everything from melon to embroidered linens, while in an open doorway, an artist carved the details of an old person’s face onto a piece of wood.

Trinidad is where we had our first group musical experience — a percussion demonstration in an open-air courtyard in sunshine and a warm breeze, the instructors talked through the different rhythms — mambo, cha cha cha, pilon — and we each tried our percussion skills. Then it was time to dance and we learnt the basic steps of salsa. With a

background of birdsong, the teacher told us when to turn, and we all moved and counted in our head, “1-2-3, 5-6-7.”

We stayed in casas particulares — guesthouses — which gave us a great chance to learn about everyday Cuban life. One morning, when I saw two men talking outside our guesthouse, each holding a cage with a yellow bird in it, I asked our host if there was a sale taking place. “Oh no,” she laughed. “They’re taking the birds out for some sunshine and air.”

Our next stop was Camaguey, Cuba’s third largest city. Bicycle taxis took us through the labyrinth of tiny streets, which some say were designed as a maze, with only one exit and lots of blind alleys and forked streets to deter attackers.

Others insist it was merely an absence of planning. We admired the art and design galleries such as that of the artist and sculptor Martha Jimenez, who also created the life-size bronze statues on the main square. We also visited the famous Camaguey Ballet to see the dancers rehearse and the workshop where they make the costumes and every ballet shoe by hand.

As we headed further south, palm trees lined the roads and workers were harvesting sugar cane in the fields, using animals rather than machinery for labour. Every time we were on the road during the tour, we stopped at a roadside restaurant for lunch and there was always a live band. At one road stop, one of the band’s percussion instruments was a cow’s jaw bone (quijada) — which we all tried playing. At another, we played guinea pig roulette for a bottle of rum. You have to guess which of a dozen or so tiny huts the animal will enter to win the booze (the guinea pig won).

Our final stop was Santiago de Cuba, which was the island’s capital from 1515 to 1607 and birthplace of the Cuban revolution. It’s busier and noisier than Havana but it has interesting features, such as the oldest house in Cuba, the Spanish conqueror Diego Velázquez de Cuellar’s house from 1522, which has been restored. I took



→ more salsa lessons on a roof at sunset before practising in a real club. Every night we'd go out to a salsa club after dinner, to try out our dancing skills with the locals. As we had all levels in the group, from beginner to almost semi-professional, hilarity sometimes ensued when we matched up with other tourists of varying levels, or locals who some of us could not keep up with.

Flying back to Havana on the last day, our guide Roger talked about music and the excitement of bands such as the

We explored the long, cobbled streets in Trinidad, famous for the colourful single storey colonial-style houses

Rolling Stones, and even J-Lo, coming to play concerts there. "This is happening, the big names are coming here. We would love to see Andrea Bocelli, Celtic Woman, Yanni, the Greek guy," he said.

"You've heard of Celtic Woman?" I asked. "Yes, we have all that here, we love Riverdance. We'd love Riverdance to come to Cuba." Roger was so excited, his eyes lit up and he was flapping his arms around so much, I thought our small



propeller plane was going to tip over as we came in to land.

I could still hear his voice in my head the next day when I boarded my Air France flight home from Havana. And now, any time I hear someone count to three, it takes me back to those hot dusty Santiago streets.

Vintage era
Much of Havana's infrastructure dates from the 1950s, including many of its cars, above



THE BRIEF

Intrepid Travel's nine-day Cuba Explorer tour, including guesthouse accommodation, transport and guide, with optional salsa and musical instrument lessons, costs from €1,495;

intrepidtravel.com. Air France has 14 weekly flights from Dublin to Havana, via Paris-Charles de Gaulle, with prices starting from €817 return including taxes; *airfrance.ie*. A double room at the Hotel Tryp Havana Libre with Cuba Travel starts from €240 per night including breakfast; *cubatravel.ie*

JMG Travel
Coach & Tour Operators

In association with



NO FLY CRUISING

Holidays from Dublin



05 June 17 9 nights
Fjordland Splendour

14 June 17 12 nights
Iceland's Land of Ice & Fire

26 June 17 11 nights
Spain, Portugal & France

07 July 17 7 nights
Summer Gardens & River Seine

14 July 17 7 nights
Scottish Highlights & Faroes

For a brochure call 074-9135960
or contact your Local Travel Agent

JMG Travel, Gortahork, Co. Donegal
Tel: 074 91 35201 • Email: jmgtravel@eircom.net

www.jmgcruise.com



From
€719
pps